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BELINDA

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A Novel.

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BY

RHODA BROUGHTON,

AUTHOR OF

'COMETH UP AS A FLOWER,' 'RED AS A ROSE IS SHE,' 'SECOND THOUGHTS,' 'GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART,' 'NANCY,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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BELINDA.

PERIOD III.—continued.

CHAPTER VII.

ONE would have thought that upon the most inveterate pleasure-seekers such a cold-water douche could not have been poured without producing a permanently healing effect; that never again would the members of the little band, so disastrously surprised in mid-romp by the Professor of Etruscan, lift up their humbled heads from the dust, into which that one glance of his narrow eye had abased them. And yet it is but too true—such is the potency of the spring and youth spirits, when they meet in lusty embrace—that before forty-eight hours are over they are planning another excursion.

A whole long day spent chiefly in her own society, for Belinda has had to expiate by working double tides her short idleness, has convinced Sarah of the wisdom and necessity of catering for her own amusement. By some means, whether of writing, or meeting on neutral ground, she has established a communication with Bellairs and his friends; and in their eager hands, guided by her commanding spirit, the project of a new expedition for the following day—*i.e.*, the day but one after their being put to the rout—speedily takes shape. It is indeed shorn of its former noble proportions, for it is not likely that Mrs. Forth will soon be indulged with another whole holiday; but upon a part—the latter part—of the afternoon she may, without undue sanguineness, reckon as lawfully her own; and now that the evenings are so long, it is of little consequence how late, whether lit by red sun or white moon, they return.

Belinda has no share in the formation of the plan. She knows of it, indeed. Did

she not know of it, would she not have broken down under the pitiless labours of the interminable day that intervenes between it and its abortive predecessor? A sort of superstition keeps her from inquiring as to any of its details. To take for granted that it will happen, will, judging by all precedent and analogy, probably prevent it. Much less dares she ask whether Rivers is to be included in it.

"I do not even know of whom your party consists," she says at last, over-night, to her sister, emboldened by the after-dinner twilight, in which they are strolling round and round the odorous garden plat, and fondly trusting that for once that sister's acuteness may be at fault, and not detect the ill-hidden motive of her words.

"Of whom it consists?" repeats Sarah carelessly, lifting and spreading out one hand, and striking the fingers, one after one, with the index of the other. "You,"

touching the thumb, "I, Mr. Bellairs, Mr. Staveley, Mr. De Lisle."

She has reached the little finger, and there pauses.

"Two ladies and three men?" comments Belinda, in tremulous interrogation.

Sarah does not contradict her.

"We should have been six last time," says Mrs. Forth, after a short silence.

"Yes, six," assents Sarah.

Belinda's heart beats low. She withdraws her hand from her sister's arm, upon which it has been resting, ostensibly to hold up her gown; but in a moment that gown is again trailing unregarded behind her. Why has she been gazing with such elation at the steady roses and ambers of the west? Promise-breaking as evening skies are, surely no sky could break such a promise as this! If what Sarah implies be true, what does it matter whether that promise be kept or broken?

"You have not asked Mr. Rivers?" she says at last, with abrupt desperation, seeing

that her sister volunteers no further information.

"I have certainly not asked him," replies Sarah gravely, with a slight stress upon the pronoun.

Mrs. Forth does not perceive the significant accentuation; and only gathers that her fears are realized. It is a moment or two before she can speak. Then,

"That was civil!" she says, in a resentful low key; "but I suppose that in the case of a common workman in an iron foundry——"

"Stay!" interrupts Sarah calmly, "before you say anything more, for which you might afterwards be sorry. I may as well tell you that he *is* invited. I had, God knows, no hand in it; but Mr. Bellairs invited him, and very officious I think it was of him!"

The morning has come. The sunset has been better than its word. No average fair day is this, upon which it simply does not rain, but one that earth, air, and sky

from morn to eve vie in nobly decking; such a day as that one before which old George Herbert poured the nard and spices of his curious sweet verse, which for two hundred years has risen to most hearts and lips on any day of unusual summer splendour. It is certain that this time the weather at least will throw no obstacle in her way. The forenoon, of hot labour to the one sister, of luxurious cool idling to the other, is past and gone. So is luncheon.

The hour for departure draws near. Sarah is already dressed; dressed to the last button of her Paris gloves; to the last bewitching pinch given to the fantastic rural hat, whose pulling to pieces and rebuilding has largely helped in the beguiling of her lonely morning.

Belinda, usually punctual, and to-day, as one would think, with treble motives for punctuality, has not yet appeared. But just as the impatient Sarah is turning over in her mind the advisability of hurrying her

by a call, she enters. At sight of her, an exclamation of surprise and remonstrance rises to her sister's lips.

"Not dressed yet?"

For, indeed, about Mrs. Forth there is no appearance of festal preparation; her head is uncovered; she is in her usual working morning gown—a gown to which traditions of ink and folios seem continually to adhere; her steps are languid, and her eyes dead.

"I am not going," she answers doggedly, throwing herself into a chair. "I must give it up!"

"Give it up?" repeats the other, with an incredulity born of the recollection of Belinda's passionately eager watching of the sunset over-night; "why?"

"He cannot spare me," replies Belinda, in a dull, level tone; "he says that he is ill."

"*Ill?* what is the matter with him?"

"I really forgot to inquire whether it was his heart or his liver to-day," rejoins the other, with a sort of apathetic satire. "It

is always either his heart or his liver; except now and then when it is his spleen!"

"Whichever it is," says Sarah bluntly—"and I suppose you mean to imply that it is not any of them, really—I do not see what good you can do!"

"I can give him his drops," replies Belinda, with the same artificial tameness; then, life coming back in poignant pain into her tone: "While you are on the river, I shall be giving him his drops! Oh!" turning over writhingly in her chair, and half burying her face in the cushion, "what will not the river be to-day! You will lie under the willows; they will push your boat right under the branches! You have never done it; you do not know what it is to lie under the willows on a day like this!"

She ends with something not far removed from a sob; then, sitting upright again, and resentfully regarding her sister:

"You do not seem very sorry: if one

were of a suspicious disposition, one might almost say you looked glad."

"As usual you are beside the mark," replies Sarah calmly. "I was reflecting that in all probability the whole expedition must now fall through, as not even I dare brave Oxbridge public opinion by taking to the water with four young men and without a chaperone."

"Of course not!" cries Belinda, catching eagerly at this suggestion, and with a feeling as of a burden most unaccountably lightened; "it would be quite out of the question!"

How comparatively easy it will be to administer Professor Forth's drops, with no simultaneous mental consciousness maddening her of the dazzling water, the sheltering grey-green willow-arch, and of Rivers lying beneath it, laughing as Sarah, alas! knows how to make him laugh, stretched in lazy forgetful enjoyment at her feet. The distinctly disappointed expression painted on Miss Churchill's pink

and white lineaments brings her back to a consciousness of her selfishness.

"I could ask Mrs. Baker whether she would take you," she says slowly, in reluctant suggestion; "she is fond of the river, and she lives only two houses off. Do you think"—dragging her words somewhat, and hoping, oh, how ardently! for an answer in the negative—"that it would be worth while asking Mrs. Baker to take you?"

"Eminently worth while!" replies Sarah joyfully, the sparkle returning at a hand-gallop to her eyes.

Belinda has already repented of her offer, but shame prevents her now going back from it. She seats herself at the writing-table, and Sarah walks to the window.

"I can see them all at the corner of the road," she says, chuckling; "they dare not come any farther than the corner, and even there I can see that they are in a cold sweat of apprehension."

Belinda writes on: that most *unkillable* of plants—hope—sending up a little fresh

shoot in her heart; after all, fate may be kind. It may have sent Mrs. Baker a previous engagement, a headache—what not? But fate disdains to be dictated to. If it is kind to us, it is out of its own free will, and not at our bidding.

"She will be delighted," says Sarah, returning in an impossibly short space of time; Sarah, who, to ensure the greater security and speed, has insisted upon being herself the bearer of the note. "She is very much obliged to you for thinking of her; she is putting on her things now, and will be at the corner as soon as I."

Miss Churchill is bustling away, perhaps not very anxious to take a prolonged farewell look at her sister's face; but that sister detains her.

"I will go with you as far as the corner," she says feverishly, catching up a shabby garden-hat, and throwing it on her hot head as she speaks.

Before she has gone six yards she has repented of her impulse. There seems to

be in these days not one of her actions of which she does not repent before it is half-way to execution. Why should she, of her own free will, forcing him to a comparison between them, set herself, poor workaday drudge as she is, beside this charming holiday creature—so delicately fine, so infectiously gay? Even now she would go back, but it is too late. The young men have caught sight of her: in a moment they have all met.

Rivers exhales a heavy sigh of relief. He has had bad dreams, and a dragging presage of ill-luck hanging about him; but both dreams and presage are as false as dreams and presages mostly are. Had not they told him that she would be prevented coming? and is not she here standing in beautiful bodily presence before him? Is he likely to observe the age of her hat, or the humility of her gown? He, never one of those man-milliners who can price, to a groat, a woman's laces; he, to whom it has always seemed as if, whatever

sheath his bright flower-lady wore, she informed it with her own glory.

"I hope you will enjoy yourselves," she says, letting her hand linger for an instant in his, and lifting her melancholy eyes to his face.

"We!" he says, laughing softly, though his heart misgives him; "and why not you?"

"I am not going," she answers quietly, though her eyes rivet themselves with an intentness of passionate jealousy on his face, to see whether he looks sorry enough.

He steps back a pace or two, loosing her hand.

"Not going?" he echoes blankly.

His dreams, his presage spoke true after all—worse than true, indeed! for have not they tricked him with the shadow of a hope?

"Come along—come along!" cries Sarah blithely, marshalling her pack and whipping up the stragglers; "we are late already. Why do not we set off? Mr.

Rivers, will you hold my parasol while I search for my pocket? This is a new gown, and a horrible misgiving seizes me that it has not a pocket."

She addresses him so decidedly that he has no alternative but to answer her, nor does she again let him go.

Before Belinda can realize that it is so, they are all off, walking away from her—away to the river and the willows. Without one word of regret for her absence, without even an inquiry as to the cause of that absence, he is gone—gone a-pleasuring!

His face indeed looked blank for a moment, but for how long, pray? Does it look blank still? Will it look blank under the willows? If her withdrawal from the party had been to him what his would have been to her, would he have gone at all? would not he have framed some excuse for escape at the last moment? Nor does she, in her unjust heart-bitterness, reflect that he could have taken no surer way of compromising the woman he loved!

Happily perhaps for her, she is not long able to give herself up undisturbed to reflections of the above kind. She must needs return without further delay to her treadmill. It is true that the morning, and the morning's Menander, are over—ill as is the Professor, he is not too ill for Menander—but her afternoon taskwork is still unperformed; her daily two hours' ministrations to her imbecile mother-in-law—two hours during which that mother-in-law's attendant is released, and sent out into the fresh air to lay in a stock of ozone and endurance to support her through the other twenty-two. The thought of her fellow drudge makes Belinda remorsefully hasten her steps. What business has she, with her selfish repinings, to defer and shorten that other drudge's holiday?

"Do not hurry back," she says good-naturedly, as she relieves guard. "It is a lovely day; take your time and enjoy yourself; I am in no hurry."

Oven-like as is the temperature of old

Mrs. Forth's room, her easy-chair is drawn up close to the blazing fire. The chill of extremest eld is upon her. Her mind is so completely gone, that she is incapable of recognizing or identifying even the persons habitually about her; nor does her daily interview with her daughter-in-law ever begin with any other phrase than:

"Who are you, my dear? If you will believe me, I do not know who you are!"

Her conversation, which never ceases, consists of this question repeated *ad infinitum;* of inquiries after various long-dead members of her family, supposed by her to be alive and sometimes even in the room; and of information such as that her father has been sitting with her (if he were alive he would be one hundred and sixty years old!), and that it is wonderful how he keeps his memory.

Belinda seats herself beside her.

After all, it requires no great call upon the intellect to repeat at intervals in a slow,

loud voice (for, with the other faculties, hearing too is gone):

"I am Belinda! Belinda Forth—James's wife; your son James's wife!" varied occasionally by such answers as these, called forth by appropriate inquiries, "He is dead!" "He died twenty-five years ago!" "Woking Cemetery!"

But between her mechanical words there is plenty of room to interpolate thoughts that but little match them.

"They must have reached the river by now. Have they walked all the way in the same order as that in which they set off? He and Sarah ahead, and the rest herding behind. Of course they have. Since both are pleased with the arrangement, why change it? How murderously hot this fire is! Is it inside her that it is burning? They are embarked now. Have they chosen a punt, or a pair-oar? Perhaps both, since there are six of them. In that case the party will divide; but how?"

It is easy to tell, by the writhing of her

hands, in what manner she pictures that division effected. Virtually, then, it will be a *tête-à-tête.* It will be alone together that they will lie under the willows!

Belinda's attention wanders wide. Twice she has answered, "Woking Cemetery!" when she should have answered "James's wife"; and is on the point of repeating the error a third time, when a vague fidgetiness in her interlocutor's manner—hazily conscious of something gone wrong—recalls her to herself.

The two hours march by. The nurse has taken her at her word, and is extending a little the border of her liberty.

Presently the Professor enters: enters to pay that punctual daily five minutes' visit, which is the share he contributes towards the tendance of his parent. For a wonder, she knows him, without being told who he is.

"Where is your father, James?" is her first question.

"Gone, my mother."

"*Gone!*" (with great animation and surprise), "gone where?"

"To the Better Land, my mother" (very loud).

"Oh indeed! Well, I only hope that they are taking good care of him: if I know that he is well looked after, that is all I care for!"

Belinda gasps. She has heard it all scores of times before: at first with pitiful wonder; then with a dreary amusement; and lastly with the indifferent apathy of use. To-day there seems to be a new and grisly jocularity about it. This then is life! A youth of passionately craving and foregoing; long pursuing and never overtaking; of hearts that leap for a moment and ache for a year; of jealousies that poison food and massacre sleep—leading up to an old age of garrulous idiocy!

She is released at last: set free to amuse herself as she best pleases. But of what amusement is a mind in such tune as hers capable? She has taken her hat in her

hand, and walks along drawing in great gulps of the exquisite evening air; while her feet, without her bidding, lead her to the river-side.

Oxbridge is, as everyone knows, rich in two rivers, and it is to the lesser of these streams that the boating-party has committed itself. It is this lesser stream, also, which for a short part of its course St. Ursula's green meadow and pleasant walk border.

It is without any acknowledged hope of meeting them that she takes the direction indicated. Is it likely that they will be so early returning? Is it likely that they, or any one of them, will be in much haste to abridge such an excursion? Tasting, as she now does, the delicacy of the air; viewing the homely loveliness of bushed bank and satin-sliding river, she can the better and more enviously figure to herself what its charm has been. But the air and the motion do her good. Beside her the stream steals along—a soothing, sluggish

companion. No song or rush has it, like the flashing northern becks; but what green reflections in it! What long water-weeds, swinging slowly to its slow current! How the willows—pensive almost as olives in their grave dim leafage—have printed themselves on its quiet, silent heart. How riotously green are the fat low meadows that, all winter long, the floods had drowned!

Here, a May-bush has strewn the white largesse of its petals on the water, and there another, less overblown, stoops to look at its own pink face's double. There are two cuckoos: one loud and near, one soft and distant, answering each other across the meads. Beneath the bank at her foot, an undergraduate lies stretched along his boat, with his book. Three others in a punt are waggishly trying to upset each other. She sits down on a bench and idly watches them, till, with shouts of young laughter, they float out of sight. Another punt, a canoe, a skiff, a boat with ladies in it.

Her heart jumps. Ah, no! not her ladies! a boat freighted with hawthorn boughs and guelder-rose branches, that tell of a joyous day's Maying in the country. Endless young gentlemen in flannels, punting, sculling, lying supine. She has fallen into a dull comparison between their gaiety and her own gloom, when her attention is aroused by the sound of a loud voice coming from some bark yet unseen, that is approaching round the corner. Many of the boys' voices are loud: what is there then in the timbre of this voice that makes Belinda, at the instant that it strikes her ear, hastily rise and pursue her walk? But she might as well have remained seated on the bench.

A punt has come into sight, guided, with an unskilfulness that seems almost intentional, by a young man; colliding frequently with other punts, bumping with many jars against the bank, and with an ample female form reclining complacently —superior to bumps or jars—in its stern.

"Stop! stop!" she cries, gesticulating with her umbrella in a way which alone would have been enough to identify her. "Belinda! Belinda!"

All the luxurious young gentlemen turn their heads to look. One of the white terriers seated by their masters in boats, sets up his nose and howls.

Reluctant and dyed with shame, Belinda steps to the water's edge.

"George Sampson is taking me out for a row!" cries Miss Watson, in a tone which can leave no member of the University ignorant of the fact related; "his people have gone back to London. I cannot think what induced them to shorten their visit so much; they came for a week. Why should not you get in and come with us? I am sure you will be delighted" (appealing to her swain) "if Mrs. Forth will get in and come with us. We are enjoying ourselves immensely!"

The unhappy young man murmurs something that may be taken for assent. The

perspiration of anguish pours from his brow, upon which is written a dogged shame and wrath too deep for words.

"No?" pursues the other, in answer to Belinda's emphatic negative of her proposal. "You are not so fond of the water as Sarah, eh? She takes to it like a young duck. I saw them setting off this afternoon; they looked such a jolly party. I offered to join them, but they evidently did not hear. Why did not *you* go with them? Not *allowed*, eh?"

Without looking, Belinda is hotly aware that a pardonable smile has stolen over the features of more than one of the listening boys, at the publication of her domestic secrets. There is not one of them who has not dropped his book.

"I will not keep you any longer," she mutters in hasty farewell.

But Miss Watson has not yet done with her.

"You should have told the Professor that you owed it to your conscience to

look after Sarah," cries she, laughing resonantly. "Judging by what I saw to-day, you would not have been far out!"

Belinda's cheek, hot with shame a moment ago, grows pale. The impulse to flee leaves her; a contrary impulse, such as draws the palpitating canary to the cage-wires and the cat's claws, roots her to the spot.

"What do you mean?" she asks faltering. "Was she"—lowering her voice, so as not to be heard by anyone else, hating herself for descending to such a question, and trying to carry it off with a spurious merriment—"was she—ha! ha!—flirting very nefariously with them all?"

"*With them all!*" repeats the other in loud irony. "Pooh! that would have been nothing; there is always safety in numbers. The others were nowhere. Rivers had it all his own way!"

This is what Belinda has been angling to hear, and now she has heard it. It is not then the figment of her disordered

fancy; it must indeed be obvious to have hit the eyes of so coarse and casual an observer as Miss Watson. Nor does the recollection of how much she had profited by her former prompt action upon information derived from the same source recur to her memory.

"He is a sad dog, is David, is not he?" cries the other jocosely; and then she bumps off again in her punt, bawling, as she floats down the stream, to her oppressed and silent boatman.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Le monde n'est jamais divisé pour moi, qu'en deux régions; celle où elle est, et celle où elle n'est pas."

A WEEK—a whole week—only a week! There are two opposing ways of looking at this or any other period of time; one of impatient marvelling at its immensity, the other of gasping consternation at its shortness. It is needless to ask which of these two moods is Mrs. Forth's, with regard to Rivers' holiday. Only a week! How many times, during its seven days, does she, with that all-answering phrase, stop conscience's mouth? Of what use for only

'a week to practise self-government?' of what use for only a week to question, with too nice a closeness, her heart as to the cause of its leapings and sinkings? her temper as to the reason of its endless variabilities? her thoughts as to the path they take? or her imagination as to the length of its tether? Only a week! Too short a space to do anything in but enjoy —to enjoy—to enjoy! With eyes resolutely shut to the cost—to the heavy score running up, that at the week's end will have to be paid. Oh, not too short to enjoy in!

It is not all enjoyment. Already, before two days of it are past, it has been marred by irksome labour, by balked expectation, by unreasoning jealousy—a jealousy whose unreason she herself, in her calmer moments, recognises; which in Rivers' presence dies of famine, having less than nothing to live upon, but, once out of the reassurance of his eyes, revives and bulks big again.

Rare indeed is it for one successful excursion not to engender another or several more. The weather holds. The Professor's heart or liver—it is never quite clearly understood which of these organs is affected—has recovered its balance, upset by his wife's Walpurgis day.

Belinda has three consecutive afternoons of freedom—three afternoons of being swiftly pulled down the river, that brave water-way alive with vigorous youthhood—of gaily drinking tea and sucking cider-cup through straws at little river-side ale-houses—of picking the freakish fritillaries in the meadows—of being towed back in dreamy languor at night-fall or star-rise—of loitering homewards with hands full of flag-flowers—of parting at the garden gate.

To that parting there comes, each evening, a deeper deadlier sweetness. It does not lie in words. There is not one word that, did the Professor protrude his velvet-capped head from his bower window, need be withdrawn.

Belinda is living on her capital. At the week's end she will be bankrupt; let her then be merry while she may! Perhaps Sarah acquiesces in her sister's view of the unimportance of any course of action that must be compressed into so short a period of time as a week. Perhaps, being in her way wise, she recognises the futility of interference. Perhaps her hands are too full of her own affairs to have much time or attention to spare for her sister's; for seldom has Miss Churchill been in such amorous straits of her own making as at present.

The course of allurement which had merely warmed up the heavy German soldiers into a pleasant and manageable tenderness, has wrought three inflammable English boys to a white heat. Daily, and in proportion as their inconvenient ardour for Sarah increases, does their friendship for each other—close and warm to begin with—decline, and tend towards the opposite pole of animosity. On the last

expedition but one, she dare no longer accept a bunch of fritillaries from one, without instantly crowding her hands with a similar bunch from each of the others. She can now never drink less than three cups of afternoon tea; as that affords to each an opportunity of handing her one. Even Bellairs, early convinced of the hopelessness of his adoration of Mrs. Forth, is now wholly hers, far more wholly indeed than she at all wishes.

"I am fast getting to hate the sight of them!" she cries, in a tone more nearly approaching tearful vexation than is often to be heard in her joyous voice, as she and her sister patrol in their wonted fashion the garden, on the morning of the week's last day. "None of them"—by this comprehensive phrase she always designates the noble army of her admirers, past and present—"none of them have ever given me half so much trouble; why cannot they understand that it is not the *fox* I care for, but the *chase?*"

"It will be soon over," replies Belinda slowly.

She says it as a consolation to her sister, but the application that she makes is to herself.

"That is all very fine," replies Sarah gloomily; "but there is still to-day. You know that we are to go on the New River this afternoon; and in a weak moment I promised that ugly Bellairs—but I declare," with a burst of petulance, "that they bother me so that I do not know whether I am on my head or my heels—that he should scull me in some little cockle-shell—a dinghey, he calls it—he and I, and nobody by, you know," with a laugh of annoyance; "and I positively *dare not* tell the others. What am I to do? I suppose," with something of her old sidling, coaxing manner, "that *you* would not care to break it to them?"

Belinda smiles; a bitter smile of recollection.

"As I was to break to Mr. Forth that

you meant to jilt him? Thank you! I think not!"

It is true that the last day has come; and the last excursion. All through the previous night, all morning, Belinda has been dogged by the icy terror—no weaker word suffices—that something may occur to prevent it. She has asked after the Professor's organs, with a solicitude whose treachery makes her blush. The very unbearableness of the idea lends it a horrid probability. In this our life are not the things too bad to be faced, those that oftenest happen?

The hour comes—the meeting at the corner (never again have the enamoured youths ventured across the threshold of the house they have desecrated!)—the walk to the river. Sarah has vainly tried to hook herself on to her sister; but—Bellairs having out-manœuvred his fellows, and compelled them to content themselves with the chaperone of a former expedition, civilly invited to complete the party—has

dropped resignedly behind with him, her face sufficiently revealing that she is braced for the worst.

The river is reached. In the choosing the boats and arranging the cushions a little diversion is effected, which gives Sarah the opportunity to pluck her sister by the sleeve, and pull her aside.

"It is all up," she says morosely; "he has been telling me as we came along, that if he read my eyes aright, he was far from indifferent to me!"

"And you? what did *you* say?"

"What did I say?" (in a tone of extreme exasperation, and yet unwilling amusement). "I told him that he had read them awrong; but"—with a rueful glance at the little craft now being made ready for her reception—"you must perceive that the dinghey has become an impossibility; what is to be done? There is not room for us all in the other; quick!"

For a moment Mrs. Forth looks before her in blank perplexity; then, all at once,

an idea, habited in a sudden lovely blush, rushes into her mind. Why not? Is not it the last day? But she does not at once clothe it in speech. Instead:

"Cannot you persuade Mrs. Baker to take your place?" she asks.

Sarah shrugs her shoulders impatiently.

"She would not hear of it; she is inclined to scream in a punt!"

There is no help for it, then. What other alternative can she propose? It is no fault of hers; accident, rather—fate—ill-luck! She has done her best. How often during the past week has she told herself that she has done her best!

"I suppose, then, that *I* must sacrifice myself," she says hurriedly, and not looking at her sister; and then, several voices at once calling upon them, they rejoin the rest of the party.

In a moment, as if some devil were behind her—or what in her present frame of mind would seem to her both more dangerous and more ugly—some amorous

undergraduate, Sarah has, to ensure herself against ambush or surprise, skipped into the larger boat.

"My sister's courage has failed her," says Belinda, standing flushed and down-cast-eyed on the bank. "I am afraid that some one will have to scull me instead."

No one answers, and she steps—some one giving her a hand—into the dinghey. Some one instantly follows her, and takes up the sculls. It is not till they are well out in the stream, and not immediately even then, that she lifts her eyes. A sort of shame weighs them down.

The manœuvre was none of hers; and yet it is by a manœuvre that she has secured this final *tête-à-tête* with him. She does not even know whether it is in accordance with his wishes that she has acted. He has expressed no pleasure in the arrangement; perhaps—her jealousy awaked in a moment from its always light sleep—he is vexed to have been baulked of Sarah's company. Perhaps, even now,

he is silently fighting with his disappointment.

She snatches a fugitive glance at him—a glance that, in an instant, is turned away again; for it has told her what she wished to learn. The cause of his dumbness is one which does not very often make us speechless in this our life. He cannot speak for joy.

She leans back satisfied and smiling. The New River is narrower, less of a great highway than the old one. Here are no imperative Eights, out of whose way all lesser boats must clear, under penalty of being apostrophized by a ferocious "Look ahead, sir!" and then run down. And yet there is no lack of company here either, on this splendid summer day.

Above, the pale bright sky, holding her forget-me-not-coloûred shield; and below, the windings of the slow broad river, and the great expanse of hedgeless meadow-land. The horses, summering there, stand knee-deep in the stream, eating, or pre-

tending to eat, the weeds; one having a wet roll of utter enjoyment in the shallows. Sheets of little ranunculus are all ablow, each stiff, straight stem and small white head erect on the water. Countless geese stalk along the meadow, waddling and cropping the grass. Others, like a white fleet, paddle and dive for water-weeds.

Into the midst of this feathered Armada they see the larger boat, which has shot ahead of them, being lustily pulled to give it a fright; instigated thereto by Sarah, who under the ægis of a female friend, and with Bellairs pulling stroke, and consequently divided from her by nearly the whole length of the boat, has resumed her usual hilarity, and by voice, gesture, and waved parasol, is encouraging her slaves. The geese separate, screeching and oaring away; and one gosling, overtaken by the prow, dives and rises again ten paces away.

Both Rivers and Belinda laugh. There is something healthy and clearing to the

moral atmosphere in a joint laugh. Rivers' mirth dies into a long sigh of contentment.

"What a day!" he says, resting on his oars, and staring up at the sky. "I *love* the river; how I missed it at first! I used to dream about it! it was one of the things that I dreaded dreaming about!"

She does not ask him what the others were. Possibly she is incurious.

"Perhaps," he says, bringing his eyes down again from the heaven above him, to the, to him, better heaven of her face, "perhaps it is worth while to have a holiday only once in two years, to enjoy it as I have done mine!"

As he speaks, a slight frown, not of displeasure at his harmless words, but of reflection and doubt, puckers her forehead.

"Are you sure," she says slowly, "that it is quite the first holiday that you have had in two years?"

He looks surprised.

"Virtually yes. Why?"

"Nothing!" she answers in confusion;

"only I happened to hear that you were in London last winter."

"I was," he answers calmly, though still surprised. "Our firm sent me up on business: that was no holiday."

"And you—you combined business with pleasure?" she says, laughing awkwardly. "You—you went to the play?"

Difficult as it is to look him in the face, while guiltily conscious of the drift of her question, she yet eagerly fastens upon him a glance whose keenness no least tinge of discomfiture can escape. But none such meets her. He has resumed his leisurely rowing, but now stops again.

"Were *you* there?" he cries abruptly. "Is it possible that I missed you? I looked—I thought—I hoped."

She shakes her head.

"I was not there! I was not" (with a twinge of self-pity, as she recalls her then mood)—"I was not in a very play-going humour; but I was told by some one who had seen you!"

Surely he will now volunteer the mention of the lady by whom he was accompanied. She has paused on purpose to give him the opportunity, but he does not take it. He leans on his sculls, staring before him in wistful bitter thought.

"You were with a lady," says Belinda presently, unable any longer to contain herself.

"A lady?" he says, starting. "Was I?—oh, of course, my sister. Poor girl! she had not been anywhere for so long, that she was naturally keen about it. She was staying with an aunt, who gave us our stalls; otherwise," with a laugh, "in the then state of our finances, the shilling gallery would have been nearer our mark!"

So it is explained. How simple it sounds! how obvious! What is there in it, upon which any but a madwoman could have hung distrust or jealousy? And yet it is upon this cock-and-bull story that she elected to shipwreck her life! A sailing-boat, lurching and tacking, and heeling

over, after the manner of such, and out of whose way they have to get, rouses them both, and they row on.

The larger boat has pulled into the bank, in order to set the two dogs, in whom Sarah affects to detect symptoms of incipient sea-sickness, on shore, where they instantly begin to give a great deal of trouble.

Punch—a dog of no ballast of mind, entirely losing his head in joy at his enlargement—first frolicsomely nips the sleepy horses' heels, a civility which they return by viciously lashing out at him; then chivies the geese, a levity which calls forth from the husband and father an awful chastisement of flapping wings, outstretched neck, and dreadfully wide-opened mouth. Slutty, on the other hand, for reasons best known to herself has set off galloping in the wrong direction, with her tail between her legs. Her recapture and the recovery and admonishment of Punch take so long, that the couple in the dinghey have time to get far ahead, and,

rounding a reach of the river, to lose their companions from sight. On and on they float in their virtual aloneness, for in nothing do the two men punting, or the happy young fellow shooting past in his skiff, disturb their solitude. They speak ever less and less. Now and again, indeed, silence becomes too oppressive, and they speak; but then speech grows over-pregnant, and they fly back to silence.

Both are strung up to pleasure's highest pitch, that pitch for which they will have to pay, and know that they will have to pay, so extortionately; for pleasure, like the scorpion, is an animal that carries a sting in its tail. Upon enjoyment is set its keenest edge. The lark, lost in light above them, might be their spokesman, only that to their song, unlike his, there is ever that minor refrain: "The last day! the last day!"

What a nameless unreckoning elation the warm breeze lends, and the motion and the very throbbing of the gentle water against the passing keel! She pulls up

her sleeve, and dipping in her bared right arm, affects to imitate his gestures, and to oar the stream with it.

"I am helping you," she cries, smiling. "I, too, am rowing; do you find any perceptible help?"

He does not reply. He rows slowly on in a dream, his eyes intoxicatedly watching that pendent hand and swaying lily wrist. He always thinks her last word or action prettier and better than all its predecessors. But surely she can never outdo this. He might borrow Florizel's words without a changed syllable.

"What you do,
Still betters what is done. When you speak, sweet,
I'd have you do it ever. When you sing,
I'd have you buy and sell so; so give alms;
Pray so; and, for the ordering of your affairs
To sing them too. When you do dance, I wish you
A wave of the sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that: move still still so,
And own no other function. Each your doing,
So singular in each particular,
Crowns what you're doing in the present deeds,
That all your acts are graces."

He pulls, still in a dream, beneath the willows. A poplar, shivering perpetually, flutters and trembles against the sky's perfect azure over their heads. Still in a dream, and at her orders, he leaves her lying pensive and cool on her cushions, and scrambles into the field to fetch flowers for her. He comes back with a great nosegay, which he lays in her lap: yellow flags, beckabunga, forget-me-nots bigger and bluer than the petted garden ones, a scrap of catch-fly, a handful of stitchworts, powdery purple grasses, all plucked haphazard, and yet gathered into such a perfect posy as no after-arranging, or sorting, or matching of colours could compass. She tells him so. Was ever man, for so poor a gift, so royally thanked?

Their companions have passed them again; the dogs re-embarked, and the whole company singing a gay part-song. No other than "The Franklin's Dogge."

" B with a Y ; Y with an N ; N with a G; G with an O ;
And he called him little Byngo."

How entrancingly sweet and merry sound the nonsensical old words across the water! Belinda and Rivers must needs follow them to the rendezvous—the little rural Trout Inn, where they are to have tea. It is brought out to them, in an arbour overlooking the stream, by a stout wench; thick bread and butter, great wedges of plain cake, a tea-set where no two articles are of the same make or pattern.

Sarah, having tided over her Bellairs difficulty, and restored to her happy-go-lucky confidence of being able to keep the rest of her team well in hand, is in delightful spirits. There are too many other visitors at the Trout to make any more glees advisable; but she is good enough to indulge the company with several quiet performances of a juggling nature, which make no noise, and need attract no attention—such as sticking half-

pence into her eyes, and disposing them ingeniously about her other features.

Belinda, too, is in wild mirth—as wild as that of the unlucky day of Blind Man's Buff. She is not nearly so clever with the halfpence as her sister; but in point of mere animal spirits she almost exceeds her. When, however, the tea-party and its humours are ended—when, in their former order, they are on their way home again—those factitious spirits drop like a wind at sunset.

The feast is all but over: surely, since the world was, never has any been so poignantly relished. In each moment have not they tasted a hundred years of ordinary tame pleasures? But it is now nigh being done, and pay-day stands at the door. The light is low and level; the geese have gone to bed, grey head and yellow nose tucked beneath grey wing. The horses' shadows stretch, longer than camelopards, across the meadow. There is scarcely any need to use the oars, wind

and current helping them; they are floating—oh, how swiftly!—to where the one great dome, and the many spires, momently growing taller, tell where the fair city lies.

The last hour of the last day is running out. When that dome and those spires are reached, it will have run out. The last hour! How many things there are to be said in a last hour! And yet the only phrase that will rise to either of their lips is, "It is the last time!" Even to that they do not give utterance: not until they have slidden more than half-way home. Then, at sight of those rapidly nearing spires—those spires that mean the end—a sort of panic seizes Belinda:

"How fast we go!" she says half-breathlessly, looking down as if she would fain stop on the lovely evening water, quickly swishing past with a pleasant low sucking sound; "we shall be home in ten minutes!"

"In ten minutes!" he repeats in a tone

half-mazed, as of one not realizing the sense of the words.

"And it is the last time!" she says very low.

Still the keel quickly cutting the flood, and the water sucking. Why so fast? In pity, why so fast? The very sun—their last sun — seems hurrying more rapidly than his wont to his hot rose and cowslip coloured bed. At first they had had days ahead of them — such riches seem incredible—then hours, now minutes, and but few of them; so few that surely there is not one of them to be wasted! Perhaps it is this thought that sends such a passion of haste into the words with which he answers her:

"Why should it be the last time?"

She receives the suggestion in dead silence—a silence so dead as to give him time for a cold pang of fear that he has employed these priceless moments in offending his dear lady, and that she will part from him in displeasure. If his hand

were laid upon her heart, he would know why she did not speak. In the last drunken week, she has not once had the courage to look her life, that is to be, in the eyes. Who, squandering and rioting in the *now*, dare ever face the *then?* At last she stammers:

"How should not it be the last, since your holiday ends to-morrow?"

"And am I never to have another?"

He is lying on his oars now; but still the boat drifts, drifts. She shakes her head with a little unhopeful smile; though surely no hopeless heart ever leaped and sprang as hers is doing.

"Perhaps in another two years!"

His oars are quite out of the water; he, at least, will have no share in accelerating the end. The drops gently drip from their blades. Twilight is taking her first grey steps across the plains, and the warm dew falls. Two or three of their dwindling store of minutes are gone before Rivers speaks.

"Term will soon be over, then you will go away, I suppose?"

"I think not — probably not," she answers indifferently, an unacknowledged disappointment at the apparent irrelevance of his remark, at his want of insistance upon his former suggestion, chilling heart and voice.

"You will stay here all through the Long?"

Why is there such a catch in his breath as he asks this question? What is it to him whether she goes or stays?

"Most likely. Mr. Forth will go to Switzerland; I believe he mostly does; but he will not take me."

"He will leave you here?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Unless you count my mother-in-law as society," with a slight satiric laugh.

A pause. A flight of plovers, going bedwards, speck the sky above them.

"Will not you—will not you—be lonely?"

"Not more than usual."

"Will not most of your friends have gone?"

Again she laughs, and her laugh is of the same unmerry character as before.

"With my goodwill they may all go; I am no great hand at making friends."

Another pause. The plovers have dwindled to nothing; the other boat is lost to sight, far ahead. What is he going to say that makes him fidget so uneasily with his unused oars?

"It is really no great distance from Yorkshire here."

Again she laughs; but the irony is gone, driven away by a tremor that is even farther from gaiety.

"My geography is not my strong point, but I should have scarcely thought that they were neighbouring counties."

"Milnthorpe is not more than five hours from here, by a good train."

"Is not it?"

And then again there is silence How

twilight is taming day's gaudiness! but doing it with so lovesome a mien, that who can regret the gone greens and blues?

"I could," he begins. How dry his throat is! He would be glad of a draught from the river to moisten it. "I could — run down — for Sunday — now and then."

It is out now! For good or for evil, it is said; and in uncontrollable anxiety he leans forward, the better to read in her face how she takes it.

She is as dead silent as she had been at his first suggestion of the possibility of their meeting again; but perhaps he has learnt to interpret that silence better. Must not she needs set some order in that riotous heart of hers before she can speak at all? Surely the earth is mistaken in thinking that night is coming. Is not it the morning that is born? His hand has lifted a corner of the great night-curtain that has hung, black and impenetrable, before

her future life. Dare she let him lift it all?

"Only now and then! Not often!" he says in great agitation. "If you have not a soul to speak to for four months, you might not mind seeing me now and then—quite now and then!"

Not mind seeing him! At that she cannot choose but smile.

"We knock off work early on Saturday, and there is a fast train that would take me back in good time for Monday morning."

There is such a desperate urgency of asking in his eyes, that she dare not look at him. What can she answer? Still that unmastered riot in her heart! and how near the landing-place is growing! All the sail-boats with furled sails and lowered masts; all the row-boats gathered home.

"It is rather a mad plan!" she says, with a laugh that has a touch of the hysteric.

"Is it?" he answers blankly. "I suppose it is."

There are not more than eight boat-lengths to go. In those eight boat-lengths she must decide one way or the other; for the rest of the party are gathered in hilarious talk about the landing-place—"Little Byngo" and many other worthy part-songs having wrought one and all to the highest pitch of good-fellowship—waiting for them.

"Oxbridge is not my private property," she says almost inaudibly, and shaking like a poplar leaf, that is never still; "you have other friends here beside me."

"I have," he answers, catching at her suggestion, with a relief proportioned to the consternation with which his eye has been measuring the half-dozen yards left him in which to plead his cause. "Why should not I come to see them?"

Nor have either he or she the candour to own to themselves or each other what is

perfectly well known to both, that in the Long Vacation Oxbridge will be innocent of the presence of any one of those friends. This is their real parting.

CHAPTER IX.

THE week and Rivers are both gone. Belinda's life has returned to its old channel, the channel in which it ran before the party at St. Ursula's. The weather has ceased to be a matter of the slightest interest. It is not of the least consequence what weather there is, or whether there is any weather at all! Done with are all tappings of weather-glasses, watchings of the march of clouds. The door-bell may ring itself off its wire, without making her attention swerve by one hair's-breadth from Menander, or interfering at all with the coherence and patience of her answers to her mother-in-

law as to the date at which they are going to bury that mother-in-law's husband, whose obsequies appear to have been unaccountably deferred for twenty-five years. There is no more talk of water-parties. Sarah herself, too late convinced of the peril of those excursions, confines herself and her followers to safe games of tennis in well-overlooked public places, where they will have no chance of reading her eyes either right or wrong, or, at all events, of telling her the result of their readings. Mrs. Forth's life has resumed the tame course which it was taking on the day of Sarah's arrival; but how different a spirit now guides it! Whither have flown the sullen discontent, the dull revolt, the rare mirth that bit, and the frequent irony that pricked and stung? *Now*, if the Professor be cross, she shrugs her shoulders good-humouredly. He is old! He means nothing by it! It is an infirmity. After all, why should she mind? How does it hurt her? If he keeps her slaving long

beyond her canonical hours in his close study, why so much the more does she enjoy afterwards the breath of the garden and the white pinks bursting so quickly into spicy bloom? If he complain of his affection of heart, liver, or spleen, she is equally ready to believe in and sympathize with each and all, to suggest remedies, or apply them.

Never has Sarah been more puzzled, or her sagacity put more at fault, than by her sister's behaviour. For it is not the mood of a day. The consciousness of being observed and of the necessity for self-control might have lent her for a while a spurious cheerfulness; but could it have given her that easy, unforced serenity which lasts undimmed through Sarah's stay—which, indeed, shows every symptom of holding out indefinitely beyond it? It is not from the post, as Miss Churchill at first suspected, that she derives her support.

The postman's arrival obviously causes her not a flutter; nor does she exhibit the

slightest tendency towards a surreptitious posting of her own letters—worst sign that can appear in a connubial heaven. It is not, then, upon a clandestine correspondence that she is feeding and blooming, so fair and fine. That an undoubtedly hard-working common hand, or, still more, foreman in an iron foundry, would be likely soon to have another leisure week at his disposal, seems to her improbable. That Belinda can be nourishing any hopes of a visit to Milnthorpe seems to her more improbable still. That, satisfied with the sight of her lost love, she can have settled down contentedly into the perennial jog-trot of an existence without him, seems to her most improbable of all.

She watches her sister narrowly; sees her severe lips surprised now and then into an apparently causeless smile; catches her singing under her breatn, as she waters her drouthy plants; sees her staid walk about the garden occasionally inclined to degenerate into a light-hearted run with the

dogs. But she does not surprise her secret. And meanwhile time goes on. The yearly gaieties with which the summer Term at Oxbridge concludes are over and gone. Mrs. Forth, chaperoning her sister, has taken part in them all—balls, *fêtes*, theatre; has seen the masons dance in their aprons, and heard the undergraduates in all the glory of their immemorial screeching. She has taken part in all, and has apparently enjoyed them with a wholesome temperate gaiety; as far removed from the unnatural elation of the Blind Man's Buff, as from the inert gloom of the previous period.

With Term is to end Sarah's visit; and on the day following her departure the Professor is to shoulder his valise for the Bernese Oberland.

The morning on which Mrs. Forth is to lose her sister has come. Sarah is taking her last stroll round the flower-beds, and across the square of sward over which she and Belinda have walked so many miles.

Mrs. Forth has just joined her, issuing from the house with the end of a laugh still lingering about her mouth and eyes.

"You seem amused," says the other, turning to meet her. "May I be permitted to inquire the cause?"

"It is nothing!" replies Belinda, bubbling over again with mirth. "It is a shame to laugh at her, only it is so difficult to help it. Mr. Forth has just been reading the Collect for the day to his mother; and at the end she said to him, 'You read very nicely, my dear; and, when you are a little older, you will read better still!'"

Sarah joins in the laugh, but not warmly.

"And this," she says indignantly, "is the companion with whom you are to be left *tête-à-tête* for four months!"

Belinda bends her charming head in a nod of cheerful acquiescence.

"It is monstrous!" continues Miss Churchill, with a growing energy of ire. "It is beyond belief! I have a good

mind, *now*, at the last moment, to give him a piece of my mind! Where is he?" glancing threateningly towards the windows of the house. "Let me take him red-handed, in the act of packing his port-manteau!"

There is such a doughty purpose in her voice and her pink porcelain face, that Belinda, seizing her arm in apprehensive detention, cries:

"Do not! It would be no use. Do you remember the proverb about putting the finger *entre l'arbre et l'écorce?* And I—I do not want to go with him."

At the last words, she has turned her head slightly aside.

"Do you think that he would be a pleasant travelling-companion?" she goes on rapidly, perceiving that her sister does not make any rejoinder, but only looks at her searchingly. "Do you remember how ashamed we used to be when he haggled over the groschen at Dresden? A tour with him would be one colossal blush."

"It is a choice of evils, of course," says Sarah dispassionately. "Perhaps my early passion blinds me, but, personally, I should prefer him."

"Should you?"

"Four months!" repeats Miss Churchill, in almost awed reflection. "How many times, at a rough calculation, in four months will you tell her who you are; and that there is a foolish prejudice in favour of burying people before they have been dead twenty-five years?"

"Perhaps I shall end by joining her in the belief that my father-in-law is still above ground," replies Belinda; but she says it in a tone of such unassumed equanimity, that again Sarah regards her with astonishment.

"Four months!" she repeats, a third time. "Do you mean to tell me that you are not *desperate* at such a prospect?"

"Of course I am—desperate!"

But there is not a touch of desperation, or even of milder sadness, in her voice.

"How do you mean to live through it?"

"How do people endure existence on these occasions?"

She has knelt on the springy turf, and is cutting, one after one, a score of young and dewy pinks, to comfort her sister during her dusty up-journey; carefully, and with the grudging hand of a real flower-lover, choosing those that are budless: no easy feat, for there is scarcely one that has not a grey-green successor beneath its perfumed wing.

"Eating, drinking, sleeping, yawning!"

"Are you quite sure that you will have no *other* support?" asks Sarah abruptly, and yet slowly.

For a moment the garden-scissors in Mrs. Forth's hand cease their clipping, and remain suspended and open, like that other pair which snipped her namesake's love-lock, while a dye as opulent as that of the new peony, whose birth the garden-border this morning greeted, stains even the milk-coloured nape of her stooped neck.

"I—I—do not know what you mean," she says coldly; "what—what other support should I have?"

"Belinda," says the other, dropping down on the sward beside her, and griping her shaking hand—scissors, pinks, and all—in her own little eager clasp, "why should not I come back and keep you company? I may not be a very intellectual companion, but at least I have a firmer hold upon my few facts than has your poor mamma-in-law. Let me come back; we will have Jane down, and Punch shall show her the University"—with a not very assured laugh. "Let me come!"

But the hands so urgently pressed give no answering pressure. Upon the half-averted face comes no glow of sisterly pleasure or acceptance. A senseless suspicion has flashed across Mrs. Forth's mind, that the present proposition on Sarah's part may be an impromptu *fait à loisir;* that it may have been arranged between her and Rivers; that here may

lie the secret of his eagerness to repeat his visit; that—in fact whatever angry gibberish jealousy may whisper to a mind ripe and ready for its reception.

Under pretext of resuming her pink-cutting, she has withdrawn her unwillingly-captured hand; but she is no longer careful: the unblown buds fall as freely as the opened flowers.

"And give up Cowes and Scotland?" she says in a dry voice; "and what would granny say?"

"It would not be of the slightest consequence what she said," replies Sarah, smothering bravely a disappointment none the less sharp for being mastered at her sister's reception of her proposal. "You are aware that my grandmother's words have always been to me as the idle wind; which, I believe, is one main reason of the sincere regard and respect that she cherishes for me. If granny is the only stumbling-block——"

"I could not think of being so selfish!"

interrupts Belinda hastily, not allowing her sister to finish her sentence.

"There would be no selfishness if I liked it," says Sarah persistently; "and—you may wonder at my taste, but I *should* like it."

Belinda has risen from her knees, and has turned to a damask rose-bush, to lay it under contribution for her nosegay.

"It is so perfectly unnecessary," she says, cutting feverishly away; "you are tilting against windmills. I make no complaint; I think it no hardship to be alone. I am not like you, miserable if I am left five minutes to my own society!"

There is such a strain of impatience through her speech, that Sarah reluctantly desists, nor are many more words exchanged between them. The cab is at the door. The luggage—cursed of cabmen—has been hoisted on the top. Punch is, at Mrs. Forth's petition—a petition certainly not backed up by Slutty—to be left on a visit to her.

The moment of parting has come. Sarah apparently wishes that that parting shall take place without witnesses. She draws her sister back into the drawing-room, and shuts the door.

"Belinda," she says, when she has somewhat coldly kissed her, looking in her face with a gravity that only once or twice before in the course of their lives has Mrs. Forth seen written on those small gay lineaments. "Belinda, I wash my hands of you; I would have helped you if I could. I have no reason for saying so—I know nothing, and you will tell me nothing; but I cannot help thinking that you are going to the devil, and that you are taking David Rivers with you!"

Then, without another word, she is gone. Without one last look from the cab window, without a farewell friendly hand-wave; forgetting even to bid good-bye to the dogs, or take their messages to Jane, she is gone. For some minutes Belinda

remains standing on the exact spot at which her sister had left her; remains standing, still and stunned. Then she suddenly throws herself into the Professor's armchair, and spreads her hands over her face. She would like not to let a quarter of an inch of it remain uncovered. The light is strong and brutal. She would like to draw the blinds down and shut the shutters. "*Going to the devil, and taking David Rivers with you!*" The blood is singing loudly in her ears. It seems to take the form of these words. Over and over again. The moment the sentence is ended, it begins afresh. How long she lies there — outwardly a log, inwardly a shameful fire — she neither knows nor cares. But after a while a tide of indignation sets in through all her being, chasing before it the shame, and she sits up.

What disgraceful words for her own sister to apply to her! and what slightest ground, excuse, palliation even, had she for

so insulting her? *Going to the devil!* And pray, what is it to go to the devil? Is it to fulfil with nice scrupulosity every tasteless or even nauseous duty of a most dreary life? To sing as she walks her treadmill? To smile patiently over her oakum-picking? To forego her own hot bright youth, and clip down its rich proportions to the meagre pattern of the dry and crabbed age with which it is mismated? To be a secretary without pay, a drudge without wage, a *souffre douleur* without hope of enlargement, a prisoner the term of whose incarceration lies in the hands of arbitrary death? If this be to go to the devil, then she is not only going there, but has long ago gone.

She laughs sarcastically, and her feverish limbs carry her up and down the room. If Sarah had given her time, this is how she would have answered her—thus and thus. For a while she walks to and fro, muttering under her breath, framing withering sentences of self-exculpation, that must

carry conviction to any mind. But that mood, too, passes. As her wrath—spent and exhausted—subsides, another voice, lower yet more penetrating, takes its place. *Going to the devil!* Is going to the devil to have a husband whose pursuits you abhor, whose infirmities you secretly deride, at whose accidental touch you shiver? Is going to the devil to be speeding with disloyal alacrity that husband's departure, to be counting the hours to the end of your only sister's visit, to be living and feeding and flourishing upon a hope that you dare not look in the face, that you would sooner die than impart to any soul that breathes? Is this to be going to the devil?

She has again wholly hidden her face with her hands. Again the light seems over-strong and pushing. And plain and distinct, beyond possibility of misapprehension, the answer comes—"Yes! yes! yes!"

* * * * *

A couple of hours later the Professor lifts a head, a good deal reddened and exasperated by long burrowing in the bowels of a portmanteau, to see his pale wife enter his room.

"I came to see whether I could help you," she says gently, though in a spiritless flat voice.

"The idea has occurred to you somewhat late in the day," replies he ungraciously. "It was fortunate for me that I did not depend upon your offers of assistance, volunteered this morning."

"I was bidding Sarah good-bye," she answers apologetically, and without any trace of resentment at his tone.

"She has been gone exactly three hours and a half," replies he drily, glancing at the clock.

She offers no further justification, but kneeling down on the floor, lets her hands, which tremble perceptibly, stray rather purposelessly over the books strewn upon the carpet.

"Pray, mind what you are about!" he cries sharply "you are doing more harm than good."

"They are to go, are not they?" she says, lifting a heavy folio, and looking humbly up at him.

"I am obliged to omit Augustine, Irenæus, and several books of reference, as they would entail very considerable expense upon me in excess of weight," he replies, peering down through his spectacles at his strewn treasures. "I the less regret it as, since I am taking no secretary with me——"

How very white her face is! Has she had some sudden scare?

"Why are not you taking a secretary?" she asks in a very low voice. "Why—why do not you take *me?*"

He shifts the focus of his vision from Irenæus to her face; but apparently the latter object gives him less tranquil pleasure than did the former.

"You have never expressed the slightest

desire to accompany me," he answers chillingly.

She hangs her head, a guilty consciousness staining her pallor red.

"Have not I? Perhaps I thought that you did not want me."

There is a deliberate pause before he answers, and her heart goes down, down. He is about to accept her offer! But his first words reassure her.

"I can see no object that would be gained by such a change of plan," he replies, in a key that plainly shows his annoyance at the suggestion having been made. "*I* go in search of health; a quest which you, happily for yourself, have no need to pursue."

She draws a long breath of relief; but now that the danger of acceptance seems less imminent, her scruples return. Sarah's stinging phrase begins to ring again in her ears.

"You—you forget that I shall be all alone here," she says, nervously fidgeting

with the already packed portion of the portmanteau.

"You will have my mother."

She shrugs her shoulders.

"She can hardly be reckoned as a companion."

At her capricious and untimely opposition, his forehead gathers into vexed wrinkles.

"Since it appears that your own society has such terrors for you, you are at liberty to invite your sister to come and share your solitude."

Again the guilty head stoops.

"She—she has engagements of her own."

"So I should have imagined," replies he with a disagreeable smile; "but you can scarcely hold me responsible for them."

Another pause. She is aimlessly wrapping paper round one of the volumes that are not wanted, that are not to be taken eruditely tripping to the Alps. She will make one more effort. If that fail, no one, not even Sarah, can blame her.

"Does not it strike you that I shall be very dull here, all by myself?" she asks, timorously eyeing him.

"I have always understood, upon your own authority, that you were indifferent to, if not averse from, amusements," he answers irritably.

"Not now—not now!" she cries feverishly. "Even if I were so formerly, I am not now; and even if I were—to be alone for four months!"

"You exaggerate grossly," returns he sharply. "There are many residents who do not leave Oxbridge until the end of July, and many who return at the beginning of September."

"They will do me no good," she says excitedly. "How will they help me?"

He shrugs his shoulders silently, as who should say that upon one lost in such mazes of inconsequence and irrationality breath would be wasted.

"Do you remember that I am young?"

she says, in a hard low voice, rising from her knees and approaching him.

"It is certainly not your fault if I do not," replies he peevishly; "for you are good enough to remind me of the fact often enough."

"It is because you always act as if you forgot it," retorts she, her temper rising under his tone.

"I confess that I fail to see how your juvenility affects the present case," he says satirically.

"Do you?" she answers with a scorching blush, that seems to burn inside as well as outside her. "Some men might think that I was too young to be left to my own devices; that I—I might get into mischief!"

He has taken off his spectacles in order to rub their glasses. He now deliberately replaces them, and regards her attentively through them.

"I presume," he says deliberately, "that that last remark is to be regarded as a

pleasantry, though I fail to see the point of it."

"I am so much given to pleasantries," she says bitterly. "We are so apt to joke with one another: are not we?"

"It seemed difficult to treat such an observation seriously," returns he, in a measured voice of displeasure. "What mischief, may I ask, are you likely to get into, here under the shelter of your own roof, and in the quiet performance of your regular duties? I cannot but think that the alarm under which you labour is an unnecessary one."

For all answer, she turns abruptly away. The infinitely difficult confession which she was half-heartedly struggling to make to him, frozen back by his gibe.

"You have evidently a most flattering confidence in me," she says, adopting his tone. "I do not quite know what I have done to deserve it."

As a reply, the Professor turns thoughtfully back to his folios, weighing the dis-

pensability or indispensability as a travelling companion of each, with an air of having dismissed the subject, and of resolutely waiving further consideration of so senseless a matter.

His wife stands dubiously watching him.

"I do not know why we are sneering at each other," she says at last, in a disturbed voice. "I had not any intention of sneering when I came here. I came to ask you in all—good faith" (he does not perceive the slight hesitation which prefaces the last two words) "to take me with you—will you?"

To so point-blank an appeal he must provide an answer of some kind; though nothing can be clearer than that he would rather have relegated the affair to the limbo of a contemptuous silence.

"I am unable to understand you," he says, with slow annoyance. "At the last moment, and when my plans are fully matured, and could only be remodelled at great inconvenience to myself, you suddenly ap-

pear with a proposal entirely to disintegrate them. Had you any good reasons to show——" (She has good reasons enough, God wot! but looking at the unlovely and unloving rigour of his face, she feels that to die, to be flayed alive—whatever things in short have been reckoned hardest of endurance since the world was—are but as child's play compared to what the telling them to him would be.) "Since, then," he continues, with an air of judicial coldness, and not thinking it worth while to finish his former sentence, "it is dictated merely by a puerile caprice——"

"It is not caprice," she stammers urgently, in puissant excitement.

"If it is not caprice, nothing can be easier than to prove it," rejoins he coolly, and so turns again on his heel.

Behind his back she makes a gesture as of one that throws up a game. Is not he in the right? Has not he a show of reason and justice on his side? Why not acquiesce without further kicking against the pricks?

But yet something drives her to a last attempt. Although thrice baffled, although at each new discomfiture her heart has sprung up in joyful relief, she will press her suit once more.

"You know that women never have any reasons to give," she says with a laugh that has borrowed something from its opposite —a sob, and in a gentler voice than that which she is wont to think soft enough for converse with him; "but sometimes their instincts lead them right. I—I think that you had better take me with you!"

Envenomed by her pertinacity, he wheels round upon her viciously.

"Perhaps you will be good enough to expose your reasons," he says, "premising, that is to say, that they are such as a person of ordinary common sense can permit himself to listen to."

"I should not be much in your way," she says humbly, and going so far—for her it is immensely far—as to lay her fair hand on his coat-sleeve. "Of course my

society would be no great gain to you, but I could make myself useful; I could pack and unpack for you; I have learned your ways thoroughly by this time. It would be odd," with a sad little laugh, "if I had not; and if you had one of your attacks I could nurse you!"

She has made her plea, and with eyes that feel dry, and breath that comes short, awaits its prosperity or miscarriage. For a while he eyes her with silent suspicion.

"It would be a most unnecessary expense," he says at last, shortly.

"I should not expect, I should not wish for, any luxuries," she answers, her pleading growing, perhaps, the more earnest from her consciousness of the intensity of the wish for its ill-success that goes with it. "I drink no wine, and I do not eat much."

"Pshaw!" retorts he, with angry ridicule; "are you simple enough to suppose that the hotel tariffs vary according to the number of mouthfuls you swallow?"

"I have no objection to travelling third-class; I should never ask for a sitting-room; I am quite capable of roughing it," she urges tremulously.

"No doubt! no doubt!" he answers tartly; "all the same, you would more than double the expense."

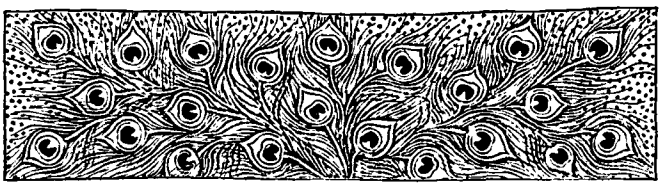
"And if I did?" she says firmly—for is not this her last appeal, and is not she bound to make it no pretence, but a real and thoroughly earnest one?—"what need that matter to you? You are well off, and"—lowering her voice a little—"you have no one to come after you."

Perhaps the plea is an injudiciously chosen one. No man likes to be reminded that he will stand or fall alone; that he is without a stake in the generations to come. At all events, on hearing it, his features assume a look even more acrid than that which they wore before.

"I must request you to consider the subject as closed," he says with a decision against which there is no appeal. "I

have, for reasons which appear sufficient to myself—and I ask no other arbiter—come to a final decision upon it; pray let us hear no more of it."

"As you please," she answers, bowing acquiescently a head whose cheeks have suddenly resumed their carnations, and its eyes their young dance; "I suppose, as you say, that you know your own affairs best, but I think I have heard that there is such a thing as being 'penny wise and pound foolish.'"



CHAPTER X.

"How sad and bad and mad it was!
But then, how it was sweet!"

THE Professor has been gone a parson's week. For the same period of time Mrs. Forth has been testing the genuineness of her appetite for solitude; nor finding it fail beneath the experiment. Perhaps it is the extreme clearness of her conscience that upholds her; for do not we all know, either by its possession or its lack, that there is no cheerfuller companion than a clear conscience? nothing that gives such a zest to appetite, or such a point to occupation? And can anyone be in fuller pos-

session of this innocent luxury than Belinda? Has not she craved with meek persistency leave to share her husband's travels? and, reluctantly compelled to abandon this hope, has not she provided, with wifely care, for every possible need that may assail him on that sanitary excursion, for whose loneliness none can blame *her?*

Did she forget his Etna? or his eider-down? or his air-cushion? Did she, as many a spouse though otherwise meritorious might easily have done, omit his tin of digestive biscuits? Was there lacking from his kit at his departure one of his heart drops, liver pills, spleen boluses?

What but the consciousness of a duty performed both generously and minutely could enable her to wave her hand at the fly-window with so collected a friendliness; smile such a serene "*Bon voyage*" to the jewel of which that fly is the casket? To assume an inconsolable grief would be

absurd, and would take him in even less than herself; but there is no hypocrisy in crying, "A good journey to you!"

As she returns up the gravelled drive, she stoops to pick up a small stone. How brightly it shines!

"Is it a strayed agate or beryl?"

"Pooh!" (throwing it down again), "it is only a pebble; it is only the late shower and the present sun that have turned it into a temporary gem."

But the same rich metamorphosis seems to have taken place in the case of every object upon which her eye alights. Did ever bountiful rose-tree show such a wealth of come flowers and coming buds, as the "Captain Christy" against the study wall? Was ever little Philistine drawing-room so rich in gold motes lustily astride on the sunbeams? Even the very dogs, the well-known dogs, seem to wear an air of better breeding; manners of higher finish; tails of more watchspring curl than on any previous morning. Even the parrot's pro-

fanities—in point of fact, very common-places of blasphemy, uttered with an Oxbridge accent—have won a raciness never before theirs.

She wanders from room to room, as it were taking possession. Are not they all her own, her very own now? Even without the explanation to that effect, which in pure wantonness of spirits she has vouchsafed separately to Punch and Slutty, they seem perfectly to understand that they are now at liberty to rumple the chair-covers, clatter down the fire-irons, oppress the cats as freely as their soul listeth; that there are no longer any nerves in the house, any dyspepsia, any learning. Nor does the passage of the hours and days bring with it any sensible alteration in this mood, of either hers or theirs.

Daily she sees the piled vehicles rolling past to the station; carrying her fellow-townsmen away to their holiday; stampedes of whole large small families to the seaside (the new Oxbridge swarms and

perambulates and crawls with little children, all apparently of the same age to a day); hardy young couples winging bold flights to the North Cape, or more modest Dolomites. She wishes them all a happy time and safe return; but not a twinge of envy goes with one of them.

Home is good enough for her; England far enough; Oxbridge fair enough. Even Sarah's parting words, at first so rankling with poisonous sting, grow gradually powerless to hurt. She begins to think of them at first with indignation, next with indifference, and at last even with a lofty kind of compassionate forgiveness.

"It is the speakers of such calumnious utterances," she says to herself, without conscious sophistry, "not those to whom they are addressed, whom they injure."

She lets her mind run with complacency round the circle of her accurately fulfilled duties. Is there one in a thousand who, considering the nature of those duties, would fulfil them as accurately? Has

not she, in addition to the tasks imposed upon her, for fulfilment during his absence by her husband, voluntarily undertaken to make a new catalogue of his library, as a wifely surprise for him upon his return? Does she scamp, by one moment, the time of her visits to his mother? Has not she rather enlarged them by nearly a daily hour? Is not the nurse ready to lick her feet, for her consideration and unselfish sharing of that nurse's burden? Does her patience ever for an instant fail under the old lady's senseless catechisms? Can anything surpass the painstaking discretion with which she conducts the Professor's correspondence, left behind him, in her charge? or the respectful punctuality and amplitude of her own letters to him? Nor is her self-satisfaction less, when she considers her pleasures. Might not every member of the University, every inhabitant of the world, if he saw fit, have leave to pry into each moment of her leisure, as of her occupations?

The happy gardenings — weeding the border, with the dogs yawning their hearts out beside her, in affectionate endurance of a pastime they are so far from participating. Dogs hate gardening; they see no sense in it. Of what use, pray, to dig a hole, when you have no bone to bury in it? The long country walks to the elm-shaded rural villages, and through the late June fields, where man has sown his corn and God has thrown in His poppies; the return home, poppy-laden, to make the house one scarlet bower, though it is embellished for only her own eye.

Never has that eye seemed so open to see. Never has her ear seemed to be laid so close to the heart of the mighty mother, to hear its beatings. Never till this year had she learned all the music that lies even in the trumpeting gnat and the booming evening chafers. Never had she grown into such familiar friendship with the woodland birds. All her life, of course, she has known that the thrush's song is sweet, and

the lark's exulting; but not till now—so unobservant are we—has she learned surely the songs of the lesser minne-singers, the minor stars of the great concert. But this summer, by right perhaps of her harmlessness and her solitude, she has stolen into their intimacy. She recognises them lovingly, not only when they sing, but when they converse among themselves. She knows the tomtit's table-talk—like the grating of a tiny saw; the cock chaffinch's —all: she grows discriminatingly cunning in all their little speech.

The dogs enjoy themselves too in their way, though they think that the flowers smell ill; and that the birds' noise is ugly and foolish, not to be named in the same breath with the poignant love-songs of the nightly cats. Slutty, indeed, has suffered one of those disappointments, from which not dogs any more than men are exempt. For four-and-twenty hours Punch has been lost; and from the more than resignation, evidenced by her during his absence, and

the acute depression coincident with his restoration, it is but too clear that she had hoped his disappearance was a permanent one.

June nears her perfumed close. The second Sunday of Mrs. Forth's loneliness has come round. The first was marked by no special incident. Belinda had not expected that it would be. But, indeed, not even to herself does she allow that she anticipates anything for any Sunday. But yet, on this second Sunday she rises with such a feeling of irrepressible blithe excitement, that she must needs casuistically explain it to herself. The air is so good. The smell of the hay comes now into the middle of the town; into street and market-place; now much more hither, where she is in the enjoyment of a sort of suburban pseudo-country. She has ever been fond of Sunday. It is always a favourite day with her; much more so in this Sunday city of innumerable church bells.

She dresses with a resolute abstaining from adding a single adornment, or making any change, however slight, in her usual Sunday toilet. To do so would be to allow that she had some reason for the alteration. Perhaps, with this motive mingles an unconfessed superstition that to presuppose a pleasure by preparation for it, is the surest way to rob yourself of its fruition.

She reads the Lessons for the day to her mother-in-law, with as reverent a distinctness as if the poor old lady could follow them, or were even aware of the nature of the attention. It is a proceeding of whose judiciousness she herself has no great opinion; but it is one of the tasks imposed upon her by her husband, and which she would by no means intermit. When they are ended, having told her the news of her husband's death, which she receives with her usual pleased surprise, Belinda goes lightly away to put on her bonnet for church.

As she walks along, her memory grows

suddenly occupied with the recollection of that other solitary walk to church at Folkestone; of the griding cold; the ice-bound earth; the misery of her yet more ice-bound heart; of the wretched prisoned starling to which she had likened herself. Not greater is earth's change than that which is wrought within herself. But for *her* change, what reason is there? Has the starling then escaped? The question flashes upon her with an uneasy start, but is instantly silenced again.

The service is one of those brief and modernized ones, that make us marvel at the patience of our earlier days; yet to Belinda it seems long. Whether sweetly singing, devoutly kneeling, or attentively listening, she has no peace from the buzzing thought—never allowed, never looked in the face—but always returning, gnat-like: "When will it be? Where will it be? How long will it last?" It does not leave her at the church door, but buzzes and teases all along the sunshiny road. It will

buzz and tease until it gets its answer. Well, let it! For is not that answer now given?

At the turn of the road, close at home, free from the stream of churchgoers, which has flowed in other directions, with no more witness than a milkman swinging unconcernedly along beneath his yoke, there it will be—there it is! Has not every moment since their parting been but a leading up to and preparation for this moment? And yet, at the sight of him she starts, as if it were a surprise, which indeed she still feigns to herself that it is.

"*You* here?" she says in a voice of airy astonishment, that would be admirably natural did it not quiver, and were it not a little overdone. "Have you fallen from the clouds?"

His answer is not over-ready. He has not yet got over the stupefaction that the first sight of her after an interval always brings upon him—a stupefaction such as, they say, the sight of the sea, of

Niagara, of any overwhelmingly great and noble natural object, produces in him who looks upon it for the first time. How much more beautiful she is than he had remembered her! how pious she looks! how chaste! Probably other women before now have carried large Prayer-books, and "Ancient and Modern Hymn-books" in their left hand, home from church; but it seems to him to be a wondrous feat of grace and holiness, performed for the first and only time in the world's history. At last:

"Are you surprised?" he asks, still feeling rather dizzy; "if you remember——"

"I am afraid that you will find all your friends gone down," she interrupts precipitately.

"Shall I?" he answers, with an indifference that he makes no attempt to conceal; "probably, no doubt."

Is it her large Prayer-book that is making her so unapproachable?

"Have you come from Yorkshire?" she asks quickly, not allowing a moment of

silence to intervene, with the uneasy idea, probably, of keeping the conversation in the polite and distant society key in which she has elected to pitch it.

"Yes."

"Did not you find it very dusty travelling?" walking fast, and looking straight before her.

"I came by a night-train."

"Do you like night-travelling? *I* do not; but then I can't sleep. Perhaps you can sleep?"

"I did not sleep!"

There is a tinge of reproach in the manner in which he pronounces the last words. What has happened to her? Is it to hear these cold platitudes that he has been rushing towards her all through the night, chiding the iron wheels for being slow—that he has spent his holiday, and foregone his rest? *Sleep!* With this *to-day*—this *now* ahead of him! Is it likely that he should sleep?

They have reached her gate, and there

paused. She does not ask him to accompany her in, nor does she make him any hospitable offer whatever. But that he has neither expected nor wished—would have declined on the unlikely hypothesis of her offering it. He has no desire to taste of Professor Forth's salt. There is something that tells him that her pause before dismissing him will be only a momentary one; and that if he does not utilize this very present instant, she will be gone, and he may return to Milnthorpe, whence he came, at his leisure.

"You will enjoy the country air after your Milnthorpe smoke," she says, her hand upon the latch, and with what he knows to be a valedictory smile.

"What do you do on Sunday afternoons?" he asks precipitately; "do you do anything?"

"*Do anything!*" she repeats, demurring; "what do you mean?"

"Do you go to church again?" very hurriedly, and doubling up his hands in his

pockets to hinder their yielding to their almost ungovernable impulse to stretch themselves out, and — with her will, or against her will—there detain her.

She casts a furtive glance towards the house—a glance that makes in him the fear of her flight, and the impulse to check it, yet more nearly beyond his governance.

"No—o," she says slowly; "not often."

"What do you do then? Do you ever take a walk?"

He has his eye upon her. Would it be quite inadmissible, if she shows symptoms of leaving him unanswered, to lay one hand quite quietly, so that she should be scarcely conscious of it, upon her arm? There is a full minute—sixty seconds well rung—before she answers.

"Sometimes, as it happens, if it does not rain—if I feel inclined."

"And—and—have you any—any specially favourite walk?"

Again she looks towards the house, behind whose closed doors the dogs are

plainly heard, telling her that they know she has come back from church, and asking her why she is dawdling.

"No; none!" she says, lifting the latch. "Of course," her words coming with a sort of shamefaced hurry, "I like the College gardens—everybody must like the College gardens; but," with a sudden remorse at this concession, "I very often do not go there, because of the dogs; one may not take the dogs into them."

She has opened the gate, and is passing through it. He has only half a minute left.

"Which is your favourite? Which do you like best?" he cries desperately after her.

"I have not any favourite. I do not know; I like them all."

She has taken out her latch-key, and is putting it into the lock.

"That means that you are determined not to tell me," he says, with a tremor of passionate disappointment in his voice;

and so, taking off his hat, turns on his heel. But, as he walks slowly down the road, telling his own heart that he has befooled himself—never would he allow that his high lady could befool him—a sort of whisper seems to travel to his ears, "Some people like St. Bridget's best!"

* * * * *

Belinda lunches, as usual, alone. The one prime and perhaps sole advantage of solitary feeding is, that you need not eat more than you feel inclined; that if from any cause your appetite has left you, there is no one to make comments on that fact. If, in addition, you have two pet gluttons on their hind-legs supporting you throughout your repast on either side, and drawing five sharp nails along the back of your hand if you do not seem to be attending to them, not even to the servant need your condition of un-hunger be ever revealed.

Punch and Slutty have never yet under-

stood why, on that June Sunday, they were feasted so royally on ribs of roast beef.

From the luncheon-table Belinda passes, according to the usual routine of her duties, to her mother-in-law's room, for her daily two hours. As it turns out, they are more than two; for the nurse, relying upon her employer's usual good-natured laxity, outstays her furlough by fully twenty minutes, and returns to find young Mrs. Forth, for the first time, unsmiling and impatient of the delay. And yet, when released, she seems undecided as to the disposition of her time.

The dogs are staring at her—one sitting, one standing—as if they knew that their fate was hanging in the balance. Can anyone resist such a litany of goggles as their eyes are uttering? It would be a crying shame to disappoint them. She will forego the trim leisure of the College gardens and take them to the Fields—a public promenade where dogs are admitted, and where perambulators push and Sunday shop-boys

jostle. But she does not call them or tell them so. After all, it is a pity to spoil them, and to let them take it for granted that they are to accompany her wherever she goes. On the whole, it is wiser not to hamper herself with them. She will make no fixed plan as to the direction of her walk; but will simply follow where whim or chance may lead. And whim and chance, after a little preliminary shamming, gone through to impose upon herself, lead her to St. Bridget's Gardens.

An interlacing of elm-arms overhead; a thick bed of periwinkle below; on the left a little classic river, and an unexpected park with smoky deer; on the right the sacred College meadow, where never vulgar foot may fall, save of the haymakers, who have but lately built the grass and flowers into a scented stack. Above, below, around, tranquillity and solitude. For, loveliest of the College walks as is St. Bridget's, it is, strange to say, also the least frequented. Thither the accursed per-

ambulator cannot come; and thither the holiday clerk and milliner come not. It is all, or nearly all, her own. Each Sunday, as the town empties, it will grow more and more her own.

Over the patterned walk, where tree and sun have laid their chequers as a carpet for her feet, she marches leisurely. She has not hurried upon any other Sunday; therefore she will not hurry to-day. No one can or shall be able to say that she has departed one jot from her accustomed habits.

She is making for her usual seat—the one that ordinarily no one disputes with her. But to-day, as it comes into view, she perceives that it is already occupied. The occupant must be a friend too, since, on catching sight of her, he comes hasting—young and most glad — to meet her. Ah—h! it is not a question of the Grosse Garten over again. *To-day* she is not first. Not that there is any parallel between the cases. Not that anyone can call *this* a

rendezvous. He does not think it necessary to offer any apology for, or explanation of, his appearance, and passes over, with a silent lenity, her little futile and ill-done expression of surprise.

"So we meet here again!"

"Shall we sit down?" he says, pointing to the bench whence he has just risen.

For an instant she hesitates, then—

"Yes, I do not mind," she says irresolutely. "I do not know why I should not; I sit here every Sunday."

Is there in this any slightest departure from use or custom? He seats himself beside, yet not near her; for he sees her frightened eye jealously measuring the interval between them; to be sure that it is wide enough. How still it is! Neither human voice nor metal heard from the city. Everyone must be in church. Is this really happening? Perhaps if he speak, if he make her speak, it will grow more real.

"So you are all alone here?"

"I have the dogs."

"But besides the dogs, no one? not your sister?"

"Did you think that she would be here? did you expect to find her here?" asks Mrs. Forth quickly, while a storm of colour sweeps across her face.

He has no slightest clue to the origin of that red tempest; he only knows that it has trebled her beauty. Did God ever before create such a wonder of loveliness as she?

"I—I do not know," he answers inattentively, a sin towards her of which he is seldom guilty; "I—I do not think I thought about it."

Wide of the mark, as we usually are in our judgments of those who have either too much or too little interest for us, she attributes his verbal unreadiness to a cause far removed enough from the real one.

"Sarah offered to stay with me," she says in an ungenial voice, sitting very up-

right, and looking rigidly before her; "but I could not be so selfish as to accept such a sacrifice from her. I could not condemn anyone to a life of such unredeemed dulness as mine now is."

There is an acrimony in her tone that he knows not how to account for; but he does not interrupt her. As long as she will speak, he is ever most gladly silent. Why should the air be disturbed by his coarse and common voice, when it may be enriched by the music of hers?

"It is by no fault of my own that I am left alone here," continues she, with some sharpness; "I wished to go to Switzerland with Mr. Forth. I asked him to take me."

"And he refused?" with an accent of the profoundest incredulity.

To be asked by this woman for leave to bestow her company upon you, and to refuse her! And how did she ask? With her arms about his neck? With tears and kisses? He writhes.

"It was not convenient," she answers formally; "he was unable to make it fit in with his plans."

The young man's heart burns within him, with a fire of envious indignation too hot to find vent in words. And yet perhaps a little of it may pierce through his next speech.

"He could not make it convenient to take you; and he could not make it convenient to stay with you; and so here you are, alone and dull."

There is something in his tone—an irony that has the heat of wrath—that rouses again her half-smouldering alarms.

"I am alone," she answers quickly, "but I am not dull; I never was less dull in my life; the days are not half long enough for me."

"And yet you said——" objects he, bewildered by the staring discrepancy of the statements which have followed so close upon each other's heels.

"What does it matter what I said?" in-

terrupts she, with a brusque, nervous laugh. "If I may not contradict myself, whom may I?"

An elderly couple—two of St. Bridget's rare votaries—have appeared upon the long straight alley dominated by Belinda's bench; an alley named after the short-faced humourist who loved to pace it. Mrs. Froth is glad. She wishes that more couples would come into sight. It is far more sociable.

As they pass, she involuntarily raises her voice in speaking. She is saying nothing that she minds either them or anyone else hearing. What a comfort it is to have nothing to conceal from the whole world!

As the hours slip by, this happy and confident complacency deepens. But how fast they slip away! She cannot affect to be ignorant of their passage, since from the Cardinal's high tower, rising above the trees, the deep-mouthed bells tell the death of each little quarter. How closely

they tread upon each other's heels! How many of them have broken the Sabbath stillness of the mead? She ventures not to ask nor think. But why does she not venture? It is the same as upon other Sundays, for she always stays late. It is with a start that at length—seven solemn strokes having beaten the air—she rises to be gone.

"It is seven o'clock!" she says hurriedly. "We must go, or we shall be shut in."

Shut in, in this green enclosure, with the stars for night-lamps, and this woman for fellow-prisoner! How dare she make such a suggestion! It is several minutes before he can fight down the frantic tumult in his heart that her words have raised, enough to say with sufficient composure:

"If you come here *every* Sunday, I suppose that you will be here next Sunday."

"But *you* will not!" she cries vehemently, stopping—they are walking slowly homewards—and facing him.

"You forbid me?" he says in a low voice. He cannot rid himself of that vision of the star-canopied meadow.

"I forbid you!" she answers excitedly; "yes—yes—yes! at least," recollecting herself, "of course you are your own master; I have no authority over you; but if I might be allowed to advise, I should say," laughing agitatedly, "that it would be a most unnecessary expense—like my journey to Switzerland. It is ill manners to remind you—but you know you are poor, until the patent is taken out," smiling feverishly. "I must not allow you to make ducks and drakes of your money."

"The Sunday after?"

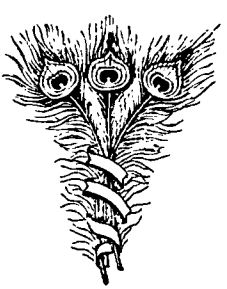
Her answer is long a coming; for indeed it is preceded by an eager dialogue within herself, that takes time.

If she prohibit it, so docile is he to her least word or sign, that she knows he will acquiesce; and she will sit upon her bench and hear the quarters chime, and see the

tall tower rise, alone. Even when her reply does come, it is a mere evasion.

There is no need to give a direct answer. It is one of those questions which it is better taste to leave unanswered.

"The Sunday after next?" she says with a flighty laugh. "We may be all dead by then; it is too far off for me to trouble my head about it!"



CHAPTER XI.

"Till Eulenspiegel war vergnügt wenn er Berg aufstieg, weil er sich darauf freute, wenn es wieder Berg abgehen würde, und traurig wenn es Berg abging, weil er das Aufsteigen fürchtete—— Was wird mir Schlimmes begegnen da ich heute im Gemüth so heiter bin: welche Freude steht mir bevor da mich Traurigkeit so niederdrückt?"

CAN it be possible that August is here? Not even early August —July's hot equivalent — but late August, that has shaken hands with September. The mornings have a taste of autumn, though high summer still rules the noons; and as Belinda paces along her garden walk, the damp dews wet her gown, and the swinging gossamers tickle her nose.

Oxbridge is at its emptiest. In a week or so people will be beginning to return; but for the present it is a desert. It is a pity that they should not return to see with what a kingly red pomp the Virginian creeper is decking the sad-coloured beauty of their town. Over their worn-grey shoulders the Colleges are throwing a cope of shaded crimson; and from underneath a necklace of rubies, the Renaissance porch of the great University church looks out.

And alone, among the waxing autumnal splendour, Mrs. Forth pursues her way. Still she walks to the rural villages; still she gardens; still she makes out her catalogue, and reads aloud her collects; and still on Sunday she sits upon her bench in St. Bridget's walk, every alternate Sunday alone, every alternate Sunday not alone. Although no further permission than that recorded has been either asked or given, she has grown to take it as an accepted fact, that, on every second Sunday, she shall

find him there as surely as she finds the green elm trees and the Cardinal's Tower. Doubtless the "greenth and blueth," as Horace Walpole called them, the repose and country fresh air, are an almost necessary tonic to him after the din and labour of his week. If he think them worth the money spent in railway travelling upon them, surely that is his affair, and one in which, without officious ill-taste, she cannot further meddle. There is no slightest mystery about their meetings. Anyone may know of them. Nor does she ever fail, in her letters to the Professor, to record among miscellaneous items of news that she has met Mr. Rivers. Why then should she abstain from a pleasure so innocent? We are creatures of habit; and she could not well do without her Sundays now.

At the mere suggestion of such an abstinence she shivers coldly. She has pitched their intercourse in a key with which no one can quarrel; has set their intimacy upon a footing from which it need

never swerve. If it were anyone's place to object, it would surely be her husband's; but so far is he from so doing, that he has not thought her communication worth even a comment. He has devoted a couple of closely-written pages to directions where she is to find a volume of Origen; but apparently he could not spare speech or time for a mention of Rivers.

If anything could have lulled her into a greater security than that which she already enjoys, it would be this fact. Serene and blooming, with a silent conscience, she walks entranced through the dreamful days. By a sort of subtlety, such as Till Eulenspiegel's, she has grown to look forward to the Sundays on which he does not come, because they lead up to those on which he does.

To-day is one of these latter Sundays, and she is sitting down to her solitary luncheon, too happy to eat, when a ring at the front-door makes her start. Can it be Rivers? Unlikely that he, who has long

tacitly abstained from even meeting her on her way home from church should present himself at a door which he has always shown such a silent energy of repulsion against entering. Can it be her husband, unexpectedly restored to her? She turns suddenly very cold. Can it be——

There is no use in repeating a question which is already answered.

"Just in time!" cries Miss Watson, thrusting aside the baffled parlour-maid and seeming instantly to fill the whole room with her presence, and her plaid gown and her fringe. "What a good smell of roast beef! I am as hungry as a hunter."

Belinda has risen, leaving her untouched plate; the consternation which the sight of Miss Watson does and must always inspire, in this case diluted and modified by relief. At all events, she is not the Professor.

"I can spend a good four or five hours with you!" cries the guest, with loud cheerfulness; beginning to divest herself

of bonnet, gloves, and pelerine. "I am on my way to Wrenbury, to the Sampsons. They do not expect me; I am going to take them by surprise. They have always bragged so much about their place down in Blankshire, that I was determined to find out how much truth there was in it; and the Sunday trains are so awkward that I cannot get on till late in the afternoon. However, it is an ill wind that blows nobody good. I can spend pretty nearly four hours with you."

Through Belinda's head there darts immediately a calculation. It is now one o'clock. In four hours it will be five o'clock: an hour later, therefore, than that one which usually finds her pacing down St. Bridget's walk. He will have to wait a full hour for her. At this thought a dismay, so disproportionate to the occasion as to frighten even herself, takes hold of her.

"Is not it rather a wild-goose chase?" she asks, forcing herself to speak. "How

do you know that you will find the Sampsons? Are you sure that they are at home?"

"Pooh!" replies Miss Watson carelessly; "if they are not, the housekeeper will give me a shake-down. One gets to know the ins and outs of a place better when the owners are away."

Belinda's only answer is a faint shrug of acute dissent.

"I never ate a better piece of beef in my life!" pursues Miss Watson warmly. "Goes to the servants, I suppose, eh? Else I cannot imagine how you would ever get through such a large joint all alone. Why are you alone? No screw loose, I hope, eh? It seems a little odd your being here all alone, when the town is such a desert. By-the-bye, what is Rivers doing up here?"

If her life here, and her salvation elsewhere, depended upon her remaining motionless, Belinda could not help the start which she can only hope looks slighter than it feels.

"Mr. Rivers?" she repeats stammeringly.

"Yes, Mr. Rivers, if you like to call him so!" with her strident laugh. "David Rivers; our old friend, David Rivers! Did not you know that he was here? Has not he been to see you?"

Belinda draws a long gasping breath, then answers distinctly:

"No!"

After all it is not a lie—not all a lie! He has not been to see her; and she has made a mental reservation as to her answer applying only to the second clause of her companion's speech.

"H'm!" says Miss Watson, biting her nails; "that in itself looks odd."

Since this last remark is not a question, and since she is by no means assured of having even a tolerable mastery over her voice, Mrs. Forth allows it to go by uncommented upon.

"What *can* he be doing up here?" continues the other, still biting her nails, and

in a tone of the most poignant inquisitiveness. "The very deadest time of the long vacation; not a soul to be seen about! Why, you might drive a coach-and-four along the side walk from St. Ursula's to King's! I shall never rest till I have got to the bottom of it!"

Her guest's eyes are riveted upon Mrs. Forth with such an unwinking energy of stare, that she must needs form some halting answer.

"Will not you?" she says, with a sickly smile; "you had better ask him!"

"I only wish he would give me the chance," replies the other stoutly; "but he knows a great deal too well for that. I came face to face with him in Church Street, and before I could get my breath he had slipped away like an eel. If you remember, we used to think him a little deaf at Dresden, but I never heard that he was blind, too! There is always something *louche* in a man obviously avoiding the

respectable women of his acquaintance, is not there?"

She repeats the question with such a pertinacity of inquiry, that Belinda is obliged to murmur that, "Yes, there is."

When the beef has gone to fulfil that destiny which Miss Watson had prophesied for it—she, at least, has done full justice to it—they move to the drawing-room.

"I am afraid that I must ask you to excuse me," says Belinda, with formality. "I always devote the next two hours to my mother-in-law."

"Pooh! do not mention it," replies the other cordially; "it would be very odd if such an old soldier as I did not know how to make herself comfortable. Do not trouble to entertain me. Books? magazines? eh?" turning over the objects on the table; "there is no fear but that I shall find something to amuse myself with!"

Nor is there. At intervals during the

two hours Belinda catches sight of her from the window, bustling round the garden, pinching the few plums on the garden wall, trying to look into the windows of the next houses; hears her opening and shutting doors, pulling out drawers, etc.

For a moment a pang of apprehension crosses Mrs. Forth's mind. Can she ferret out anything? any letter? any paper? But no; a smile of pride and reassurance crosses Belinda's face. What in all her poor archives is there that might not be exposed to the eyes of the whole world? to the gimlet eyes of (if imagination could grasp the idea of such a hideous multiplication) a hundred Miss Watsons?

The two hours are gone. It is a quarter to four; the time at which she usually begins to put on hat and gloves, and saunter, deliberately blissful, towards St. Bridget's. It is clear that it is not the hour at which she will begin to saunter thither to-day. Nothing looks less like

departure, more like a prolonged stay, than Miss Watson's bonnetless attitude, plunged recumbent in the Professor's chair.

"I have been having a look round," she says cheerfully; "I like to get the bearings of a house. There was one door locked; the Professor's sanctum, eh?"

"He likes me to keep it locked in his absence," replies the Professor's wife icily, "as he does not wish his books and papers to be disturbed."

"You shall show it me by-and-by," returns Miss Watson comfortably; "after all, there is no hurry. I have half a mind to stay till the late train, and have a bit of dinner with you; nothing extra; a cutlet, a grill—whatever you have ordered for yourself."

"It is a very slow train," says Belinda precipitately.

"I wonder what train Rivers came down by," continues the other thoughtfully; "of course he has only run down for the day. I have been thinking it over,

and the more I look at it the more *louche* it looks!"

Belinda has not sat down; in the forlorn hope, perhaps, that the maintenance of a standing attitude may give a less established tone to her guest's presence. She now hastens to the window, and begins to fidget with the blind-cord, which pulls up and down perfectly, and needs no rearrangement.

"It is an odd place to choose for an intrigue, too," continues the other reflectively. "I have always been told that the men are so strictly looked after; but perhaps it was its very unlikelihood that made him pitch upon it, eh?"

Possibly Belinda makes some answer, and that it is drowned in the rattling of the blind, which she is feverishly jerking up and down. Every drop of blood in her body seems to have given its fellow rendezvous in her face. *An intrigue!* Does he indeed come to Oxbridge for an *intrigue?* An intrigue with whom? *An*

intrigue! Is that what other people beside Miss Watson would call it?

"I shall certainly mention it to his mother, Lady Marion, when next I meet her," says Miss Watson resolutely; "I do not think that it would be acting a friend's part not to do so. I do not actually know her, but there is a sort of connection between us; I was at school for six months once at Brussels with a cousin of hers, and there is no doubt that there is something uncommonly *louche* about it."

Judging by the frequency with which during the next hour she repeats this phrase, it must be a favourite one of hers. By five o'clock its recurrence has driven Belinda to the verge of desperation. It seems to her (though that is a figment of her guilty fancy) that there is a dreadful meaning and significance in the unblinking look at her with which each repetition of the word is accompanied.

Five o'clock! He has been waiting for her a whole hour beneath St. Bridget's

elms, straining his eyes up the long straight walk. At length:

"I think," she says, looking overtly at the clock—at which she has long been stealing covert glances of agonized impatience—"that if you wish to catch this train—and you would find the later one extremely tedious—you should be setting off!"

"Should I?" replies the guest indifferently. "It is of no consequence if I am late; I am a good walker, and I enjoy running it fine; I see no use in kicking one's heels at a station!"

She ties on her bonnet, and adjusts her strong grey fringe with a maddening deliberation; stops in the middle to examine and inquire the history of a piece of *bric-à-brac*, which she had not before noticed; and finally (it is said that no Englishwoman ever knows how to take leave) expends herself in an immense farewell speech, from which the word *louche* is by no means absent. But she is gone at last.

Before she is well round the corner—before there is any real security of her not returning, according to her usual custom, to pounce afresh upon her just-freed prey, Belinda has fled to her room; and—her trembling preparations hurriedly made—is speeding, like an arrow shot from a bow, to St. Bridget's. There is no leisureliness about her walk to-day; no feigned indifference, no loitering, no counterfeit indecision, as to her goal. To-day she cannot afford to play her little comedy.

Is not she an hour and a quarter late? Will she find him gone? Will he still be there? Will his patience have held out? In the whole of life, in the whole scheme of nature, there seems to her no other question in the least worth answering.

People look at her oddly, she thinks, as she passes. Hitherto she has not minded how many people she met, or who knew whither, and to what end, her steps were tending. To-day it seems as if they all glance meaningly at her, as who should

read her guilty secret in her face. Until to-day she has never thought it either a secret, or guilty. An *intrigue!* That is what they call it! She is engaged in an *intrigue;* and by some means they know it.

As she enters St. Bridget's a couple of humble lovers meet her face to face. As they pass her they happen to expand into a grin, provoked, probably, by some ponderous joke of their own making; but she takes it to herself. They know that she is a married woman hastening to an assignation. The very birds seem to chirp, and the boughs to rustle meaningly. Well, let them!

It will be a dreadful memory to face by-and-by; but for the moment there is no room for any other question but the one—"Will he be there?"

Before she reaches their trysting bench it is answered. She comes upon him so suddenly, that she has no time to tone down her pace to a decent saunter. He

has seen the speed with which she was hasting towards him; her breathlessness, her pallor, the desperate anxiety of her eyes.

There is no use in shamming to-day. But, indeed, his own condition leaves him no right to criticize hers. Perhaps he is in even worse case than she; for she can speak, and he cannot.

"You are not gone!" she says with a gasp, such as one might give whose reprieve met him at the scaffold-foot. "I thought you would be gone!"

For answer, he grips her two hands in his (never before in all his life has he been master, and for how few poor minutes, but of one), and looks at her with a white fixity of passion, to whose relief no words come. Even when they are both seated on their bench—neither ever quite knows how they reached it—it is still she who speaks; nor when she does so, is it to ask him to release her hands. Perhaps in her agitation she is not aware that they are still in his keeping.

"It was Miss Watson!" she says, with that gasping staccato utterance, as of one who, after long running, has not yet recovered his wind. "She came—she stayed four hours. She had seen you!"

He nods his head in acquiescence.

"Yes."

He is plainly incapable of anything beyond a monosyllable.

"She asked why you came here," says Belinda; the words fluttering out on greatly quickened breath, but still with more coherence.

"Yes?"

One would say that he were scarcely attending, so distant and dreamful is his voice. He is conscious of nothing but the warmth of those wonderful sweet hands lying in his. If he could realize Miss Watson at all, it would probably be with gratitude; for it is she virtually who has given them to him.

"She said," continues Belinda, trembling exceedingly, and looking guiltily down on

their locked hands, "that you must come here for some intrigue." She pauses, and then adds in a whisper, "She must not say that again."

He is attending now. There is a significance both in her look and in her low words that cannot escape him.

"What do you mean?" he says thickly.

"I mean," she says, still scarcely above a whisper, "that you must not come here again."

She looks away from him as she says it, unwilling, perhaps, to see the immense consternation that her fiat will have brought into his face; but he observes for so long a dead silence, that she grows uneasy. Has her blow killed him? or is it possible (this latter suggestion is a scarcely less bitter one than the former) that he already acquiesces?

She is just making up her mind to steal a glance at him, when he speaks, and the tone of his voice tells her that her first idea

of his case was nearer the mark than her last.

"I am not to come here again?"

"No, I think not; no!"

"I am not to come to Oxbridge again?"

"No."

"I am not to meet you again?"

"No."

"Not anywhere?"

She bows her head, unable to speak.

"*Never?*"

She repeats the gesture.

There is such a rising strain of unbelieving agony in his voice, culminating in his last words, that speech has wholly forsaken her.

"We are to live out the rest of our lives without each other?"

Again that acquiescent motion of the head.

"And you can bear it?—of course," correcting himself, with a bitter humility, "why should not you? it is not much for

you to bear. Well, then, I suppose I must bear it too!"

He has let go her hands, and covered his face with his own. She is free to depart. He has always obeyed her; and he is obeying her now. What is there to keep her? And yet she does not stir. Her aching eyes stare vacantly down the long straight alley. Sweet green walk! Dear solemn tower! Kind chattering birds! Good-bye! for never, never can she bear to look upon any of you again!

She stirs restlessly in her misery; and in an instant he has dropped his shrouding hands, and is looking at her with a haggard apprehension in his eyes.

"Are you going now?"

"Not at once—not this moment," she answers faintly; "there is no hurry. I can stay as long as usual, if you wish."

If he wishes! He laughs outright in his pain.

There is a long, long silence.

St. Bridget's is even emptier than its

wont. Not one visitor besides themselves breaks its entire seclusion. Only the grave tower-clock deals out time's little parcels.

She speaks first.

"I do not want you to be unhappy," she says, with a sort of sob of compassion for his spoilt youth. "I should like you to be happy."

"So should I. Will you show me how?"

"Oh, if I could!" she cries, in a heart-wrung accent. "Oh, if we could but be as we were before——"

She stops.

"Before Wesenstein?" he says.

The word seems to have roused him out of his lethargy of wretchedness. Ere she knows it, he has won back her hands; and before the strangeness of his eyes her own waver.

"We might almost fancy ourselves at Wesenstein, might not we?" he says, with a thrilling feverish smile; "it was a green, quiet, woody place like this. Do you remember it well? It is odd that we have

never talked of it since—is not it? Why should not we talk of it now? You sat on the grass, and I lay at your feet! Do you recollect? Yes" (with a heart-rending inflection), "I see that you do. You gave me your hand! No! my Ice Queen, you would never have given it me! I took it and kissed it; shall I show you where I kissed it? Just there—and there—and there!" (passionately fastening his lips upon palm and fingers); "and then—*then* I took you in my arms! Can you believe it?—and yet I am speaking truth—once I had you in my arms, and *I let you go!—I let you go!* Would to God" (with a terrible burst of agony) "that I had been struck dead there before I let you go!"

The storm of his passion has carried her away.

"Would to God you had!" she says, frenziedly; and so unresisting—nay, passionately complying—she gives him that two years and a half ago foregone kiss. One kiss! That is all. One drunk,

oblivious moment, and then the awaking! She, but now so consentingly embraced, has wrenched herself out of his arms.

"What—has—happened—to—us?" she says, staggering away from him.

But he awakens slowlier than she.

"You have owed it me, since Wesenstein!" he cries wildly, and with a sort of triumph.

And there is silence. If indeed the loud blood dinning in their ears and hammering their temples can be so called.

"I suppose," she says, after a while, speaking as if speech were a new weapon, and she ill at handling it, "that—it—has been—coming to this—all along—only—I did not—see it. I suppose that no one would believe me—but I did not see it; did you?"

He makes no answer.

He is still lapped in the Elysium of that long-promised and at last fulfilled embrace.

"Is it possible," she says, looking piercingly at him, and with a sombre reproach in

her voice, "that you saw all along—you knew—you thought——"

"I thought nothing!" he cries, brought back to his senses by the sternness of her tone. "Oh, my dear, do you think so ill of me as to suppose that I was willingly leading you on? I tell you, I thought nothing! I only knew, that for two hours in every fortnight you allowed me to live! you let me into the heaven of your sweet company!—was not that enough for me? Was I likely to look beyond?"

She has tottered to the bench, and now sits half-crouched in the corner of it.

"I suppose," she says, shaking her head hopelessly, "that, in point of fact, we have both been living upon our Sundays." Then after a pause, with a sort of groan, "Oh, I thought we might have been trusted!"

He has not sat down again, but stands before her in guilty, miserable humility, waiting for his doom.

"I am not very sorry for you," she says, after a while, lifting her dull eyes to his

face. "You are mistaken if you think that I pity you very much. You have your work—often before now have I been jealous of it, and of the hold it is gaining over you! This is the best thing that could have happened to you—a sort of thing that your mother would rejoice at—the best test after all. No more distractions! No more senseless outlay in railway journeys! it is almost as good as being taken into partnership!"

She glances up at him at intervals, as she plants her stabs, to see how much he can bear. He is not yet at the end of his endurance apparently, for he still stands before her, bent-headed and ash-white, in motionless patience.

"But will anyone tell me," she says, dropping her arms hopelessly to her sides, and looking distractedly upwards, as if to win a response from that sky to which we, in trouble never answered, ever look, "what is to become of *me*?"

Her cruelty towards himself he had

taken like a man; but her self-pity is beyond his sufferance.

"I will tell you what will become of you," he says in a rapid broken whisper, sitting down again beside her. "Will you let me tell you? Are you listening? After all, they are only a few beggarly hours that we have had to live upon: I do not know how we have subsisted upon such a pittance for so long. What is there to prevent us—why should not we——"

"Stop!" she cries hoarsely, thrusting out her spread hands, and pushing him away from her. "I know what you are going to say! I know it as well as if you had already said it."

The terror in her eyes, the shrinking gesture, have set him almost beside himself.

"You say that you are not at all sorry for me," he says, with a sort of hard sob, and I dare say you are right; but I must ask you to—to—make a little allowance for me! I am not in my right wits. It

was unmanly of me—I had no right to shock—to outrage you."

"I am not in the least shocked," she says with a slow distinctness; "*that* shows, I suppose, to what a depth I must have fallen. I stopped you because—because I knew that if I let you finish your sentence I should—not—have—said—no—to you: I—should—have—said—yes."

She pauses, unable to fetch her breath. And yet, despite the confession in her words of her own defeat and his victory, something in her air holds him aloof.

"But if—" she goes on presently, fixing him with the terrible appeal of her eyes, while her face grows sharp and thin—"if you are—what I have always thought you—if I know you right, you—will—never—finish it!"

There is a dead dead silence; she still holding him with that look, until she knows that in her dreary battle she has vanquished.

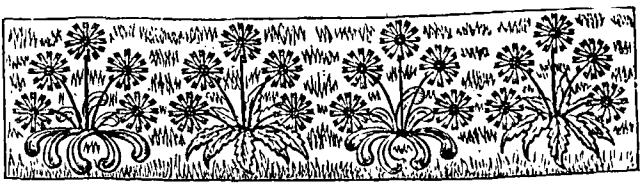
"And now," she says with a tearless

decision, "go! I did not tell the truth when I said I was not sorry for you! Oh, I *am* sorry! I AM! There! go!—what is the use of crying? I hate to see a man cry! God bless you! God be with you! Go!"

And he, obedient, goes.

PERIOD IV.

"These violent delights have violent ends."



CHAPTER I.

"Unser Sommer ist nur ein grün-angestrichener Winter."

THE lives of the Professor, of Mrs. Forth, of Sarah—of all those with whom we have had any concern—are poorer by a full year than when we left them. The "Fragments of Menander" have been given to the world; and as certainly not less than three people have read them, they may be said to have been a success. So much so, at all events, as to encourage the Professor to delve and grub in the entrails of the Fathers for new Fragments. For the present, however, he has to delve and grub alone. For the

present his secretary has broken down; for the present the pack-horse has sunk down beneath its pack. Doubtless it will soon be set on its legs again, and enabled to resume it; but, for the present, its back is unladen, and it is turned out to grass. Months of unlightened, hopeless, joyless labour! Her only wonder in looking back afterwards upon them is that they did not sooner work their inevitable effect. Months of unrelenting application, of chest-contracting bending over manuscript and proof; of entire absence of exercise and relaxation—for of her own will she has forsworn both. Thought is deader, memory fainter—and for what object but to kill both does she now live?—in the exhaustion consequent on overwork. Why and for whom should she spare herself? She will go until she drops. And the Professor, delighted to acquiesce unquestioningly in a metamorphosis so greatly to his advantage, always incurious as to interests that lie out of his own beat, and

with the professed invalid's radical incredulity as to the possibility of anyone else being either sick or weary, drives his willing horse merrily along, until one fine day she falls down between the shafts. How glad she is when the breakdown comes! How intensely she prays that it may be the final one! But it is not so. By whatever door Mrs. Forth is to leave this world, it is certainly not by that of the entire derangement of the nervous system, for which attentive doctors unanimously prescribe immediate change, idleness, pleasure. The Professor is always angry with anyone for being ill; but against a sickness which involves undone work, expensive medicine, and a costly move, his indignation is too deep for words. He is scarcely more angry with her, however, for falling sick, than she is with herself for recovering. For as long as possible she has discredited it. Her physic bottles vex him hardly more than do her returning appetite, restored slumber, waxing flesh, and waning

fever, herself. She had wished to die; and he, since she has turned out so unhealthy, would not be sorry to be rid of her. And so she lives; lives to put him to the expense of a migration to the English Lakes. He seems unable to shake off the idea that she has done it on purpose.

* * * * *

It has been as usual a wet morning, and to the bounds of the Lowood Hotel on Windermere all its impatient guests have been confined. Now that afternoon has come, it has brought with it a sort of doubtful fairness; more a cessation of storm than anything approaching positive fine weather. Wray's Castle, lifting its grey towers from its woods exactly opposite, has come into sight again. The Langdale Pikes have just shaken the rain-clouds off their notchy crests; but they hang poised above them, ready at once to descend and clip them. They have still fast hold of Wetherlam, though their lucent lightness shows that the sun is just behind them,

and will presently drive his brave bright car over their vaporous bodies. It is very clear, from the high-flung windows of a sitting-room on the second floor, and also from the fact of its being a sitting-room at all, firstly that Professor Forth is not in it, and secondly that it is not his. Since his wife's sister and grandmother have thought it necessary to give her the meeting here, he has no objection to her taking advantage of their salon, since he is quite unequal to the expense of providing her with one of her own.

In a horse-hair arm-chair of that peculiar lodging-house build which pinions the arms and forces the head forward, sits Mrs. Churchill, placidly watching an unlading coach. At a certain somewhat early period of old age, given an easy temper and an entire absence of feeling, a person often appears for a few years to stand stationary. Since we last saw her, Mrs. Churchill has stood stationary. Not one more has been added to the number of her

few wrinkles, and her old dimple still goes and comes with her agreeable smile. On the sofa, by right of her invalidhood, Belinda is lying, with a crop head of little curls; and out of the window not occupied by Mrs. Churchill, Sarah is hanging most of her body, alternately watching with feverish interest, and looking back over her own shoulder to chronicle the doings of the family who occupy the floor beneath them, and who, happily for her, have a balcony upon which they now and then emerge.

"There are two brothers, and two sisters, and a wife," cries she animatedly. "I cannot make out to whom the wife belongs; none of them seem to care much about her!"

"Perhaps she had money," rejoins Mrs. Churchill. "Dear me!" returning to the contemplation of her coach, "what a load for those poor horses, and how they are smoking!"

"They are all out on the balcony now,"

says Sarah, delighted; "come quick, Belinda, and look!"

"I will take your word for it," replies Belinda lazily.

"It makes one quite wretched to see such cruelty!" says Mrs. Churchill, in a thoroughly comfortable voice, pursuing her own subject.

"They have been playing battledore and shuttlecock," says Sarah narratively. "I wish we had a battledore and shuttlecock."

"Whom would you expect to play with you?" asks her grandmother drily; "the Professor, or me?"

"They have dropped the shuttlecock into the road," continues Sarah narratively, and in a tone of breathless interest. "There is another man with them now; he cannot be a third brother; they are betting him a shilling that he will not climb over the balcony and swarm down the iron leg to fetch it. What a fool he will be if he does! Surely I have seen him before somewhere! I wish he would look up.

Why, granny! Belinda! granny!—it is—it must be—young Bellairs!"

This time both obey her summons; but whether it be that their footsteps make more noise than they are aware of, or for whatever other reason, some of the party below choose this unfortunate moment to look up; and in a second they have all three slunk shamefacedly back again.

"Young Bellairs! Poor young Bellairs!" cries Sarah, throwing herself into a chair, and chuckling. "Young Bellairs, and the dinghey! do you remember, Belinda?"

(It is not very likely that Belinda has forgotten.)

"I wonder is there a dinghey here that I could take him out in?" says Miss Churchill thoughtfully. "Granny, are you aware that a dinghey only holds two? but if you insist upon it, in the interests of propriety, we will squeeze you in as well."

Mrs. Churchill laughs.

"I need not decide at once, need I?"

says she, entering into the joke; "and as the dinghey is not here, and the carriage is, we may as well be setting off on our drive."

"He will see me get in!" cries Sarah, skipping to the glass, and adjusting her hat; "they watch us quite as much as we watch them. Well, let him! I flatter myself that I can get into a carriage with any woman in England!"

They are gone (not, however, before Miss Churchill has once again put in her head to say urgently, "Mind that you keep a good look-out upon them!"), and Belinda has the sitting-room and all the horse-hair chairs to herself. Perhaps the better to comply with her sister's exhortations, she abandons the sofa, and drawing up her grandmother's chair yet closer to the window, looks dreamily out on the lake, from which the hotel is parted only by the road, a quickset hedge, and a strip of grass. Upon the lower foreground hills opposite —so dark a second ago—what a nation of

sunbeams has swooped! and now, as quickly they are gone again, and only the lawn that slopes to the water has become dazzling-green as any chrysoprase.

If she had died as she wished, she would not have seen that chrysoprase-green; nor the masterless wavelets sucking in riot in among the stakes of the little pier; nor the small white yacht curtseying and congeeing along over them. Is it worth while to have kept alive, in order to be looking at them here—alone?

What a noise the family below are making? What *can* they be doing? Surely they must be engaged in some pastime more violent than battledore and shuttlecock. They sound as if they were throwing chairs at each other. How plainly she can distinguish Bellairs's voice.

It was at St. Ursula's party that she first heard that voice. It was in answer to some sentence addressed to her by that voice, that her own suddenly broke down; it was while that voice was still in her ears that

she caught sight once again of him who made her inattentive to all voices! She moves uneasily in her chair. She wishes that Bellairs had not come.

What a sudden spurt of daring glory on the stern necks of the Langdale Pikes! She can see their hollow deep clefts, and their scattered verdure, broken through by green rock-masses. She discovers a waterfall hanging unmoving on the mountain flank. How they are giving up their grey secrets to the sun! It is cruel to be looking at them all alone! to have to look now and for ever at all fair sights alone! She should be used to the thought by now, surely. What is it that is giving it such new and pricking life to-day? Is it Bellairs's voice? She will hear it less, perhaps, if she have some occupation to distract her.

She takes up the advertisement-sheet of the *Times*, lying near her, on the floor, and throws her eyes over the Births, Deaths, and Marriages.

For months she has been unable to read the Obituary without envying every one of the dead people recorded in it: the old man gently extinguished at eighty; the deeply-mourned wife, torn away in her prime; the strong man violently perishing in flood or field; the tiny sister-children swept away within two days of each other by the hot fever. There is not one among them all that she does not envy! They are out of it! They have done with it! done with the tangle, done with the heart-break, done with the strife! She envies them now. And through them all she still hears plainly the voice of Bellairs.

Thank Heaven, however, she will not hear it any more for the present. He has gone out. Surely that is he sauntering down to the little pier, with a smart girl in a red cotton gown—a red cotton gown that but now incarnadined the balcony beneath Mrs. Forth.

He is unfastening a little boat; he is helping his companion in! Belinda laughs

aloud. Some one has been too quick for Sarah! Some one has stepped down into the dinghey before her!

The incident gives a lighter turn to her meditations, and she drops the obituary, and follows with her eyes the little boat and its two occupants, with as eager an attention as her sister might have given it, until it becomes a speck upon the water. She laughs again. There is a sound of wheels. Is it her grandmother and Sarah returning? She longs for them to come back, to have the pleasure of telling them. She leans her charming cropped head out of the window. No! it is a coach changing horses; next a *char-à-banc* disgorging its stiff-legged load; and now, for variety of interest, a steamer is coming churning up to the little pier. Will anyone get out of it? Anyone to form a new element at the *table-d'hôte* to-night, and be speculated about as one speculates upon the lives and habits of those with whom an hotel life brings one into brief and jostling contact?

The steamer is crowded, black with thick-packed heads. But it seems as if no one were minded to alight from her.

Yes, one man has landed; a man now crossing the pier with a knapsack on his back; a pedestrian tourist, obviously. Very likely an Oxbridge man, with a Plato in his wallet, come to woo philosophy in the heart of the hills. If he is so, perhaps she may know him—by sight at all events. She rubs her eyes. What tricks they play one! Do they see ill, or is there a little something in the man's gait that might remind her of—but no! it is the sight of Bellairs, and the memories he has roused, that have put such an insanity into her head. Perhaps sickness has left her vision weak and deceptive. He is drawing nearer—very near, past the strip of grass, through the wicket, across the road. She has been thrusting her head out of window to have a nearer view, and the better to correct her delusion. But suddenly she draws it in again, and with a small, choked cry, falls

back in the horse-hair chair. It is not corrected! It is confirmed, and turned into truth and certainty. For a few moments she lies stock-still. Has her face caught from Wetherlam and the Pikes some of their stormy illumination? If she had died, she would not have seen him crossing that pier, treading that path, unlatching that wicket-gate!

It has been hitherto only in her dreams that he has ever walked towards her. She is glad—oh, glad—that she did not die! And what has brought him hither? Is it possible that he has heard of her presence here, and, unable any longer to endure those torments which had so nearly laid her low, has fled hither in madness to rejoin her? But in a second she has exonerated him from the suspicion. She has told him to go, and he had gone; and she knows him well enough to feel sure that, without her bidding—cost him what it might—he would not return. It is, then, an accident! a happy, most happy accident!

What pleasant accidents can and may happen! For an accident no one can be blamed. For an accident no one's conscience need smite them. All the consequences of an accident may be taken with an easy mind.

Her eyes stray away towards the high mountains, but once again they are grasped so close in the clouds' moist arms, that not a glimpse of crest or ridge is to be caught. Are not they tired of their centenary—nay, æon-long fight with the vapours? Worsted, worsting, will there never be an end to it? It is like her fight with her own heart. Vapours, sunbeams, waterfalls; to-morrow—to-morrow she will be looking at you not alone. To-morrow! But will he be still here to-morrow? Unless she give him leave to stay (and how dare she give that leave?) may not he be off before day-dawn?

By the noise below her window, she knows that another coach has driven up, and is changing horses. A panic seizes her. What security has she that he may

not have halted here for only ten minutes, and be going on by it? She springs to her trembling legs, and returning to the window again, looks out, but this time in hiding behind the curtain. Two or three of the passengers have got down, and are beginning to climb back into their places again. Some luggage is being hauled from the roof. She scans narrowly the crowded travellers, and then draws a long breath. There is not one among them that bears the most fugitive resemblance to him. She is reprieved. He will be here, at all events, till to-morrow. He will dine, almost certainly, at the *table-d'hôte.*

A hot, excited smile breaks over her face. She will have the advantage over him. She will expect to see him; and he will not expect to see her. Will the shock be too much for him? Will he be betrayed by its suddenness into any too evident and overt emotion? But no! He is a man, now; strong and self-contained. How much older he has grown to look! Even

her one cursory glance has told her that. A pang of regret for that passionate gone boyhood, which was so absolutely hers, contracts her heart. No! he will show no emotion. Perhaps he will turn a shade paler. As for her, she will not be pale, neither red.

Her thought breaks off abruptly; dispersed and banished by a knock at the door. Ere she can cry "Come in!" forestalling her permission of admittance, one of the heated and hurried hotel waiters, chronically rushing from Sunday morning to Saturday night, has entered—has deposited a note before her, and has disappeared ere she has time to put any question as to its source and origin. Not that there is much need for such, although only twice before in all her life has she seen that handwriting. A mixed memory of the two former occasions rushes storming back upon her mind; a memory of the misery of that early summer morning in Dresden; of the hell of that Folkestone winter evening. She

has come in for a good deal of misery in her day. She looks in procrastination at the device on the seal—it is sealed—and at the address. Surely his handwriting, too, is changed; more virile, steadier, less emotional. She holds the note between her two palms (how lately he has held it in his!) in a trembling luxury of delay. It is only the recollection of how soon, how immediately, how at once, her solitude may be put an end to by the return of her sister and grandmother, that at length decides her to open it. What can he have to say to her? Not much, whatever it is. It will not take her long to read.

"I have just seen your name in the Visitors' Book; believe me, it is by a pure accident that I am here; must I go? If I do not see you at the *table-d'hôte,* I shall understand that I must.

"D. R."

Long after she has mastered its contents —surely not difficult of comprehension—

she remains staring at the page with wide dull eyes; a feeling of blankest disappointment at her heart. And yet, had she expected him, in writing, on a paper committed to a careless hand—a paper that might easily go astray, or be lost—to break out into compromising, culpable endearments? She would be outraged by the suggestion. But oh! it is cruel, *cruel* of him to have thrust the weight of the decision upon her; to have taken their meeting out of the province of accident into which she had joyfully recognised it as having fallen!

Since he has forced choice upon her, there is but one way in which she can choose. He must have known it! He must have done it on purpose! Honourable of him? Perhaps! Her mind gives a frigid assent. But oh, cold, *cold*, and most cruel! His very face had told her that he was changed. He has grown wise at last. Well, he shall never know that she was not as wise as he.

She has crumpled the paper angrily in her hand, and begun to walk agitatedly up and down the room, pressing and kneading it with her fevered fingers. Then her mood changes, and she stops and anxiously smooths out the letter again. Perhaps she is wronging him. Perhaps in the first stun of that surprise he has scarcely known what he wrote; has not perceived the drift of his own words. Perhaps, on a closer examination, she may find, by the tremulousness of his characters, that he had not his wits about him. But no. There is no tremulousness. Strong and decided is each up and down stroke. The man who penned that note was obviously in fullest possession of his intellect and mastery over his nerves. She is still poring over the few matter-of-fact words, vainly trying to wrench them into a sense that they cannot bear, when a high, light laugh, which cannot be ascribed to anyone but Miss Churchill, heard on the landing outside, makes her, in guilty haste,

thrust the document into her pocket. It is only just in time; for there is always a sort of whirlwind suddenness about Sarah's entries.

"Well!" cries she, in high excitement, "have you kept a good look-out, as I told you? Has he discovered that I am here? Where is he? what has he been doing?"

It is a proof how far Mrs. Forth's thoughts have been straying from the young gentleman in question, that at first she looks back at her sister in blank stupidity, not understanding to what or whom she alludes.

"Who?" she says thickly; "what?—Oh!" (with a forced laugh; comprehension coming tardily back), "of course! but I have bad news for you: he went out at once in a *dinghey*—I do not think they call them *dingheys* here—but at all events in a little cockboat—with the girl in red."

"Did he?" replies Sarah, simulating the first symptoms of a swoon, and falling in a

heap upon the sofa; "then, granny, cut my stay-laces, and burn every goose-quill you can find in the room under my nose; for there is nothing left me but to faint!"

CHAPTER II.

THE Professor's room, as well as Belinda's own, is at the top of the house. Economy, as is well known, has to be sought in hotels by climbing; and the Professor has pursued her to the leads.

At their first coming, indeed, the numerous flights of stairs to be surmounted ere attaining her sloped roof and her truckle-bed, had proved a severe tax upon Mrs. Forth's enfeebled strength; but use and returning health have made them easy. At all events, Belinda does not now think twice about climbing them, even if no absolute necessity prompt the assent. Is it

absolute necessity that, half an hour after Sarah's return, finds her first faintly knocking, and then looking uncertainly into her husband's room.

"Who is there? who is keeping the door open, and creating a draught? Pray shut it at once!" cries a crabbed voice from the interior.

She complies by entering. Owing to the confined space allotted to him, the Professor has to use some nicety of management in the disposition of his property—a disposition which entails the entire going to the wall of his toilette arrangements. Both bed and floor are strewn with folios and MS., which are piled, to the exclusion of basin and ewer, even upon the cramped washhand-stand.

Upon the one chair the occupant of the attic is seated: a fur-coat wrapped about his thin figure, a skull-cap on his head, his feet aloft upon a hot-water bottle, a writing-case upon his meagre knees and an ink-horn in his left hand.

"Pray be careful where you step!" he says sharply, looking up and becoming aware of the tall, fair presence that has enriched his neighbourhood. "Do not you see that you are treading upon Tertullian?"

She had not seen it; but she at once corrects her error.

"I believe that I expressed a wish not to be intruded upon this afternoon," he continues, since she does not at once speak or explain her entrance; "owing to having to support the whole weight of my work single-handed" (with a resentful glance at her idle and obviously convalescent beauty), "I am very much pressed for time. No doubt you have some good reason to give for infringing my injunctions."

"I thought that you might be surprised if you did not see me at the *table-d'hôte*," replies she coldly; "so I came to tell you that I do not mean to appear at it to-night, and to ask whether you have any objection to my staying away?"

"Is it possible that you are threatened with a return of indisposition?" he asks, with a sudden, quick look of peevish anxiety.

She shakes her head, smiling suddenly and bitterly. It is so apparent that his solicitude is due, not to care for her health, but to apprehension of a new doctor's bill.

"Thanks, no."

"You appear to be unaccountably out of breath," he says, in a vexed voice.

"Not more than anyone must be, in climbing to this cock-loft," replies she sullenly.

Perhaps his examination of her face has reassured him as to her soundness, for once more he dips his pen into the ink-horn.

"You have not answered my question," says she brusquely, perceiving in him a deliberate intention of henceforth ignoring her.

He makes a gesture of annoyed impatience.

"It scarcely appeared to me to require an answer; I suppose you gave notice this morning to the manager of your intention to be absent?"

"No, I did not."

"Then of course it is out of the question; according to the rules of the hotel, every meal not expressly countermanded is charged for; and I am really not in a position to countenance such irrational waste."

At the contempt and churlishness of his tone, her cheek burns.

"It would be no waste if I ordered nothing instead," she answers, doggedly; "and I am more than willing to fast."

"And incur the risk of a relapse?" cries he, in hasty displeasure. "I must imperatively forbid your exposing yourself to any such hazard!"

"I could have a cup of tea in granny's sitting-room; I am sure that she would not grudge me one."

"I request that you will do nothing of

the kind," rejoins he, nettled, whether at his interrupted work, or at the accent, which she has taken small pains to render slight, laid by her upon the personal pronoun. "Your grandmother is, of course, mistress of her own actions; but since it is a well-known fact, that if you once indulge in such senseless luxuries as a private sitting-room, and meals served separately, the rate of charges in your case is instantly and exorbitantly increased, I must beg you at least to conform to the ordinary rules of the house."

He is so surprised by the entire silence in which she accepts his fiat, that he looks up irritatedly at her, standing in sullen, motionless loveliness beside him; looks up to find her regarding him with a smile hard to qualify.

"It is by your express wish, then, that I dine," she says, with a low emphasis; "you *insist* upon my dining."

"I see no reason for an arbitrary departure from your usual habits," replies he,

with ill-humour; "you are obviously perfectly restored to your normal state of health; anyone," with a recurrence of that streak of resentment, "would be surprised now to learn that you were regarded as an invalid; there is nothing that gains upon a person more, by indulgence in them, than valetudinarian fancies."

The singular smile still stays, as it were stereotyped upon her features.

"You speak from experience?" she says, in a tone of quiet insolence.

The colour mounts to his parched face.

"You are implying," he says, with deliberate anger, "as you have frequently and offensively implied before, that I am a *malade imaginaire*."

She shrugs her shoulders carelessly.

"I do not think—I have never thought—that you are nearly so ill as you imagine yourself to be."

"Do not you?" he answers. "Possibly some day you may be undeceived."

There is such a pregnant weight of solemn meaning in his look and words, that, for a moment, she glances at him, staggered and half-frightened; he waving her, in a displeasure too deep for further speech, to the door. But the impression does not last beyond the first flight of stairs.

"Pooh!" she says, reaching the landing, "he will see us all out!"

* * * * *

The *table-d'hôte* bell has rung, and, answering its call, the visitors at the Lowood Hotel have poured into the large, light dining-room, and quickly filled up the two long tables, where, as the season advances to its height, elbow-room becomes daily scarcer. The established visitors have made their way to their habitual places, and the new ones been ushered to theirs. The oldest inhabitant, who always says grace, has said it, and the landlord is ladling out the soup. Belinda is in her

usual seat, between her husband and her sister. It is a situation of her own choosing —as far as regards her sister, at least. The Professor is not a good person to depend upon for general conversation through a long dinner; the almost insoluble problem of how to obtain his full pennyworth—how to eat so much as to ensure that no extortionate profit shall accrue from him to the proprietors of the hotel, and yet how to eat so little and so lightly as not to alarm his coy and skittish digestion—keeping him for the most part wholly silent. But Sarah is royally indifferent as to what pecuniary advantage may be derived from her, and has no more consciousness of digestion than an emu; so, upon her sprightly comments on their fellow-diners, Belinda has usually relied to drag her through the *ennui* of the long and weary courses.

To-day she lends them but an abstracted ear. Though she has entered and taken her place without once looking up, she yet knows at once that for her the full room is

empty. Gradually she allows her eyes to steal round a glance, in confirmation of that of which she is already sure. Here are the forms and faces that a week's fellow-eating has made rather more familiar to her than her own. Here are the usual *vis-à-vis*, the stockbroking family: jocose red father, aiming side-hits of well-meant pleasantry at herself and her sister; full-blown, hearty mother; elaborately elegant daughter. At the far end of the board a few insignificant novelties. That is all! It is true that he may be placed at the other table, to which her back is turned; but this, a guilty consciousness prevents her moving her head to ascertain. Were he there, however, it is certain that he would be seen by Sarah, who is constantly throwing restless glances over her shoulder, in pursuit of the object of her own interest.

"Here they come!" she cries, jogging her sister's elbow; "here they all come!—all but the girl in red! all but Bellairs! Is it possible that they can be out in the

dinghey still? I shall complain to the manager!"

Belinda smiles faintly. The soup-plates are vanishing. It is evident that *he* is not coming. Her compromising concession has been made in vain. It was her part to shun him; and she has forced him to shun her.

Probably she will never now have an opportunity of exculpating herself, even to the extent of making her lame explanation of the way in which it came about.

How these people opposite stare!

She has begun desperately to fan herself; but the Professor at once requests her to stop, as the current of air produced by her fan makes him sneeze.

"He must have upset her, and drowned her!" says Sarah, in her sister's ear. "I hope he has; it would serve her quite right!—*God bless my soul!*"

This last ejaculation is uttered in a key differing so widely from the cold-blooded

calm of her former aspirations, that Belinda gives an involuntary start—a start that may or may not be observed by him who has just quietly entered the room, and is having a reversed chair at the other table obsequiously set on its legs for him.

"Did you know that he was here?" asks Sarah, very low.

But Belinda does not answer. A mad relief—a lunatic joy is choking her throat.

"Did you?" repeats the other urgently; "is it possible——"

"Do you think that I sent for him?" says Belinda, in a suffocating whisper. "How can I help his being here?"

There is so much of the lion-at-bay in her lightning eyes, that Sarah wisely desists from further questioning.

"It is an odd coincidence that they should both have turned up again on the same day," she says; her mind reverting to the truant Bellairs.

Happily for Belinda, that culprit now

appears on the scene, shortly followed by his companion in guilt; and for the rest of dinner Miss Churchill's conversation becomes an indignant recitative, a running commentary upon their actions.

"I never saw such a brazen pair in my life! how little he thinks that I can see him! Very odd that he has not yet caught my eye! Ah! there, he sees me! 'How do you do? how do you do?' Extraordinary! he has not turned a shade paler; he must have gone to the devil altogether. They are *so* much interested: they are asking who we are, and whether we are any relation to the Duke of Marlborough. He is swaggering about us, and promising to introduce us after dinner. If he dares!"

Belinda is well content to allow the stream of soliloquy beside her to flow on unchecked. A silent husband—ever tussling with his economico-sanitary problem; a self-absorbed sister; what better neighbours could she wish for? Even

the family opposite, whose notice had before annoyed her, immersed in good cheer, have forgotten her. She can lean back unnoticed, and sun herself in the feeling—not recognised nor formulated enough to constitute a reflection—that though he is lost to her sight, so is she assuredly not to his. He is probably wondering why her hair is cut short.

Does he think it an improvement? Possibly it may appear to him in a high degree disfiguring. It is the first time that the question of the becomingness or unbecomingness of her crop-head has presented itself to Mrs. Forth's mind. She is not one of those happy women whose beauty is *per se*, and to themselves as good, for pleasure and profit, as an estate in the Three per Cents. She has never cared for it except as it affected him. Is she much disfigured? She lifts one hand and passes it over her shining tendrils, as if to obtain an answer by touch. In so doing, and in consequence of the small space allotted to

each diner, her lifted elbow comes into momentary contact with her husband's sleeve.

"I beg your pardon!" she says, starting.

No galvanic shock sent with uncomfortable sense of dislocation along bone and joint could have brought her down more suddenly from that vision-world through which, happy and crop-headed, she has, during three courses, been walking.

"You eat nothing!" says the Professor, glancing upbraidingly at her empty plate, and contrasting resentfully in his mind his own heroic efforts with her supine and culpable abstinence; "it is a mere farce—a throwing away of money—to set good food before you!"

"It would be a worse throwing away of it, if I were to gorge myself when I was not hungry," replies she surlily; and with that their conjugal dialogue ends.

The dinner, too, has ended by-and-by. The oldest inhabitant has given vent to his

second grace; and there is a rustling and streaming through the passage into the hall, and out upon grass-plat and pier.

Usually the Churchill party do not participate in this latter outward movement. To watch the humours of the company from the privacy of their sitting-room window has, on previous evenings, seemed to them better than mingling with them. But to-night Belinda lingers. She *must* speak to him. In justice to herself, to him, to her husband even, she must speak to him. It would be impossible to leave him in that misapprehension about her, under which he must necessarily now be lying.

"Are you going out?" asks Sarah, with a sharp look in her sister's agitated face. "So will I. She has actually had the bad taste to whip him off to their balcony again. After all, they were not in the least anxious to be introduced to us. Pr—r!" (shivering), "it is cold; I will go and fetch my little French hood; if *that* will not bring him down, nothing will!"

She runs off, and Belinda, with as composed an air as she can muster, strolls towards the pier, and, leaning her arms upon the rail, looks down into the troubled lake water. It is a chill and unsummerlike night; raw-aired and boisterous. The clouds hug the hills and smother the struggling moon. Many people, feeling the nipping breeze, have hastened indoors again. Others come out, fortified by Newmarket coats or fur capes. How *can* they find it cold? To her it seems to be torrid. Her eyes are fixed upon the angry little waves, sucking, and fighting, and dashing themselves against jetty and shore; and the steps of the promenading, cigarette-smoking, chatting idlers, pass to and fro behind her. They do not all pass her. Two feet pause hesitatingly beside her.

"Did you get my note?"

His face may be older than it was, and his handwriting steadier, but at all events his voice trembles quite as much as ever it

did. What sense is there in being glad at that? And yet she *is* glad.

"Yes," she answers whisperingly, neither looking up, nor expressing any surprise at his presence, nor at his omitting all the forms of conventional greeting; "but you must not draw any inference from my being here."

She pauses; but, except that she hears his quick breathing beside her, he may be gone: in so entire a silence does he await her explanation.

"My—my—Mr. Forth insisted upon my dining," she says, growing burning red at what she feels must appear the wretched inadequacy of this explanation. "It—it—is a very prosaic reason," breaking into a nervous laugh, "but he did not wish my dinner to be wasted!"

Still silence. Has he nothing to say? not even one poor word of pleasure? Probably he is nerving himself up to exact an answer to that question of his, which she has virtually never answered. Pro-

bably he is going—oh, barbarous!—to throw the decision again upon her. But perhaps he has learned, within the last hour, to let sleeping dogs lie. At all events, when his speech comes, it is not the one she had dreaded to hear.

"You have been ill?"

"You judge by my hair, I suppose," replies she, laughing again; "otherwise, as Mr. Forth says, it would certainly never occur to anyone that I was an invalid."

It is the second time within two minutes that she has quoted her husband. Does she feel a sort of chaperonage in his very name? At that name a slight shudder passes over Rivers's frame.

"But you have been ill?"

"Nothing interesting," she says, with a cynical shrug; "no brain fever, or charming hectic. I simply—a very common complaint in Oxbridge, you know—broke down from overwork. I always tell everyone I broke down from overwork; it sounds so well."

In his ears, possibly, it does not sound so well.

"*Overwork!*" he repeats, shocked. "Has your—who has been overworking you?"

"Nobody; I myself!" replies she, quoting Desdemona, and with about as much truth in her speech as there was in that of the Moor's wife. How loud and restless is the waves' wash beneath them! "And you?" she says softly; "how has it been with you? At all events," with a melancholy smile, "however hard you may have been working, *you* have not broken down!"

"No," he answers, with a sort of humility, as if he were ashamed of having to make the admission; "I have not broken down."

"It would take a great deal to break *you* down," she says, glancing at him with a sort of reproach for his health and vigour; "and yet, in point of fact, men die more easily than women; you die when you do not want to die, and we cannot die when we wish: that is about the state of the case in this best of all possible worlds."

She has raised herself from her bent posture, and has lifted that face, whose character seems to be changed and gentled by her babyish hair, to the sky. What strange clouds, like giant curls and columns of sacrificial smoke from the altar of some dark God! and the bright gibbous moon shouldering her way through a sullen pile before she can reach a clear sky-space, and make the dark mere chastely splendid. How few people are left upon the pier! By what right is she left? They have closed the windows of her grandmother's sitting-room. She can see the silhouette of Mrs. Churchill's cap upon the blind. Why is not her own silhouette there too? Alas! in five minutes it must be!

"Do you wish to die?" he says, in a shaken, low voice.

(Can this wonder desire that the world should be made dark by her extinction?)

"Yes," she answers dreamily. "No—yes—on condition that I might come back if I found it even worse than this; and

you?" looking at him with a moonlit wavering smile—"but no; you would not leave your 'rabble,' and your patent. By-the-bye, how is the patent? is it taken out yet?"

"The *patent!*" he cries, breaking into a sudden, unsteady, tender laugh; "is it possible that you remember about the patent?"

"Do I remember it?" returns she, in a kind of scorn; "then, if *I* had taken out a patent, you would not have remembered it?"

"It is an old story now," he answers, still with that tremulous, unglad laugh; "it was taken out some months ago. Our firm has adopted it with success; others have followed their example, and——"

"And you are on the highroad to fortune," interrupts she, with a quivering lip; "to the gilt coach and the Lord Mayor's gown. I have always told you that you would end by being Lord Mayor! Yes," dragging out the slow syllables one

after another, "on the highroad to fortune."

"On the highroad to fortune!" repeats he after her, with something not unlike a sob in his voice; "so you used to tell me at Oxbridge; is it such a good joke that it is worth repeating?"

There is not a soul remaining on the pier beside themselves. Even Mrs. Churchill's shadow has disappeared from the blind. It is clear that she has had the fire lit, and has drawn up her chair to it. Has no one, then, a glance for the black and silver water? for these great cloud-bulks, and this victorious maiden moon? Not a soul! It is all their own, his and hers! all the night's cold steely splendour! all the wind's wintry song, and the waves' loud lap! Surely their voices are no sadder than his—his, with that sob in it! How easily she could sob too! Perhaps her spirits are weakened by recent sickness.

"There is no pleasing you!" she says, half hysterically; "what would you have?"

"What would I have?" cries a high, matter-of-fact voice, striking suddenly in; "why I would have a warming-pan, and a fur coat, and some mulled claret: that is what I would have. Oh, it is you, is it?" with a very slight and cursory recognition of Mrs. Forth's companion. "Belinda, are you quite out of your senses?"

There is something in Miss Churchill's tone, and in the decision of the way in which she has put her arm under her sister's, and is leading her away, that it would require a clearer conscience than Belinda's to resist.

"I—I—was waiting for you," she stammers.

"And David was helping you? Well"—shrugging her shoulders, and relapsing into a lighter tone—"I was detained; he waylaid me on the landing; I never knew that little *capote* fail. He has been telling me about them; she plays the banjo: that seems the great feature! I will play the banjo too!"

CHAPTER III.

ALTHOUGH there may be something in Professor Forth's remark that no one, not let into the secret, could now conjecture his wife's invalidhood, yet, by right of that invalidhood, she has hitherto been excluded from the longer excursions made by her grandmother and sister in the neighbourhood, as being too severe a tax upon her not yet completely restored powers. But on the morning succeeding her lake-side colloquy, Mrs. Forth is, it appears, expected to resume the habits of health.

"I must request your kind chaperonage," says Miss Churchill, running to meet her

sister, as that sister enters Mrs. Churchill's sitting-room after breakfast, and lifting a cheek as fresh and sweet as soap and water, health and jollity, can make it to hers. "Granny has struck work, as she has frequently done before: she has always in her heart hated the picturesque, and to-day I have induced her to own it; eh, granny? As for me, for reasons best known to myself, I am going to spend a long and happy day at Coniston; and I see no earthly reason why you should not accompany me."

By the extreme positiveness of her tone, and determination of her eye, it may be inferred that Sarah looks for a demurrer to this proposition. If such comes, it comes in silence.

"You had much better say 'yes,'" pursues Miss Churchill warmly; "if you do not, and if you continue to look as robust as you do now, you will certainly be tied by the leg again to Menander before you can draw breath!"

Belinda laughs, a little unnaturally.

"That shows how little you know about it; Menander has been three months before the public."

"Well, no doubt he has left plenty of little brothers behind him," rejoins Sarah lightly; "what do you say?"

"Do you think it is safe to venture?" replies Belinda, walking to the window, and pointing in faint objection to the blind vapours that feel about the mountain-crests; "do not you think that the weather looks rather uncertain?"

"Does it ever look anything else?" retorts Sarah drily. "Come, quick! 'yes' or 'no'?"

"I will ask Mr. Forth if he can spare me," says Belinda reluctantly, leaving the room with lagging steps.

"Tell him that he shall be put to no expense; that you shall not even pay the turnpikes," cries Sarah saucily after her.

She returns presently with still more lagging steps.

"Well?"

"He has no objection," answers Mrs. Forth slackly, sitting down, and letting her arms drop depressedly beside her.

"You tried to make him forbid you, and he would not," cries Sarah sharply, and with a pungent laugh.

"You are really too clever," replies Belinda, reddening, and with a petulance which shows that this shaft has gone home; "you have got your own way; you always get your own way. I am going with you; let us hear no more about it."

The carriage is at the door, and a few such idlers as mostly watch the arrival and departure of each coming and going vehicle, hang about it. Sarah is already seated, and is exchanging such chastened and diluted gallantries as the publicity of the situation will admit, with some one hanging over the balcony overhead. Belinda has purposely loitered over her dressing, in the hope that some opportune mountain storm may even yet intervene to

hinder the execution of the, to her, so distasteful project.

But in vain. The perverse and hostile sky is, all too obviously, clearing. As she issues from the hall, she glances furtively to right and left. Yes, he is here! His voice, which but for Sarah's manœuvring might have been all day in her happy ears, is addressing her.

"You are going out?"

(Do they all hear, as plainly as she does, the blank disappointment and discomfiture of his tone?)

"Yes," she answers, lifting for an instant her eyes with an instinct of ungovernable plaintiveness to his; "for the day! on a pleasure-trip! Wish me joy!"

She has taken her seat, and, just as they are setting off, she leans forward, and addressing the driver, repeats in a peculiarly clear and distinct voice that direction which has already been given him, "To Coniston!"

"You are determined that there shall

be no mistake as to our destination, I see," says Sarah sarcastically.

Belinda's chest heaves.

"I thought that you might like Mr. Bellairs to know," she answers ironically. "By-the-bye, who is to keep watch and ward over him in your absence?"

"I have received private information that they all mean to come to Coniston too," replies Sarah tranquilly. "I thought I would be beforehand with them!—a poor project, but mine own!"

Away they go from the wind-freshened lake, whose waves are running riot in the sun; while, as they pass along, the clouds roll up and up from fell and scaw and nab, leaving only a lawny kerchief here and there about their necks; as though loth all at once to desert them. And by-and-by kerchief and veil are swept away too, and the hills are free.

Through loveliest pasture-fields, crowded with great bluebells and vetches, and meadow-sweet that smells of almonds; by

meadows where women are tossing the late hay, beside the laughing Rotha; under Loughrigg and over chattering Brathay's grey stone bridge they go. Up and up they climb; between the weather-painted walls, with their lavish ferns and their crannied flowers; till at the top of the long ascent they pause to breathe the horses, and look back.

Fair mountain-wonders, now again conversing with the clouds; and yet lit on your bare flanks by the sun: Red Screes, Fairfield, Wansfell Pike, with your pointed head! to which of you shall we give crown and sceptre, as Queen-hill, in this your morning glory? For a while they both look in silence. Then:

"It seems a pity that we are not in the least enjoying ourselves," says Sarah regretfully.

Belinda's heart gives a passionate assent, though her lips are closed. Is not life full of such pities? of exquisite spread feasts, and gagged mouths that are not allowed

to taste them? With what an agony of pleasure would she be looking at these curly mists and shining shoulders; at these heavenly becks, rain-swollen in their noisy mirth, dashing in happy bounds down the hillsides, if only—if only! And this is such an easy, probable "if," too!

"If you could but think it, you know," continues Miss Churchill, turning in calm reasoning to her sister, "I am really much better company than David; and it is no great stretch of imagination to say that you are not much duller than Bellairs, eh?"

But Belinda is still staring, in sullen, grudging misery at the wasted loveliness before her.

"Shall we try to pretend, at all events, that we like it?" says Sarah persuasively. "It would be more to our credit; I think *I* could, if you could."

But Mrs. Forth is unable to promise even thus much.

"You cannot do it?" says Sarah leniently; "well, I am the last person who

has any right to blame you. Personally, I have never cared for a landscape without figures in the foreground!"

But as time goes on, this seems to be the species of landscape to which Miss Churchill is to-day to be condemned. Although Coniston has been long ago reached, luncheon eaten, and several coaches and *char-à-bancs* driven up and unloaded, yet is there no sign of the appearance of any one of the ornamental foreground figures for which she had confidently looked.

"Beaten by a banjo!" says she tragically; "if it had not been for the banjo I should have *walked* away from her. I will never go anywhere without a banjo again!"

Belinda laughs grimly. "I would not!"

"I suppose there must be some tiresome sight to be seen here," says Sarah, yawning; "it would never do if they found out that we had not seen it: not the lake—no! I could not bear that; it would remind me of the dinghey! What did the

waiter tell us? copper-mines and a waterfall? Come, do look a little livelier, and brace your mind to copper-mines and a waterfall!"

They set out dispiritedly, but before they have gone five yards:

"I will leave word which way we have gone," cries Sarah, brightening, "in case anyone asks for us."

"A most unnecessary precaution!" replies Belinda morosely.

A walk undertaken in such a spirit is not likely to be productive of any very acute enjoyment.

"We are to turn to the right when we reach the Black Bull!" says Sarah gloomily; "I wonder what would happen if we turned to the left?"

But they have not the energy even to make this experiment. They have passed village and white-washed church, and asking their way of the civil villagers, presently find themselves climbing a mountain road, with a little gay river frisking

over its worn boulder stones on their right, and a green fell on their left. Ere long the road leaves the bright beck, and climbs higher than it; and trees interpose a leafy shield between them and their noisy friend. But it calls to them from beneath, "I am here; you will find me soon again." And so they do. For by-and-by the road swerves to the right, and they are once more free from the envious sycamores and mountain ashes, with their red rosaries, and are standing on a rough stone mortarless bridge with parapet broken down, and beneath them the stream plunges in a little storm of foam. Is this the waterfall? They do not know; they do not much care. It is a little waterfall, even if it be not the one in search of which they have been sent.

"My cup is full!" says Sarah, sitting resolutely down. "I am hot; I have not a leg to stand upon; my pretty project has *avorté;* if Niagara were round the corner I would not go to look at it. Oh,

why did I leave my granny? dear granny! how she would have hated this!"

"Even more than you do?" asks Belinda cynically.

Mrs. Forth is still standing, her eyes riveted on the little cascade, and her heart repeating over and over to itself that bitter morning plaint: "How pleasant! if only—if only—what?"

"Belinda!" says her sister, after a while, in a voice of cautious triumph, "do you see anything moving between the trees? yes? I thought so! A more direct answer to prayer I have seldom heard of!" Then, with an abrupt change of tone to one of sharp and real annoyance: "If he has not brought that eternal David with him!"

* * * * *

"Are you going to see the copper-mines?" says Miss Churchill demurely, a couple of minutes later, addressing the new arrivals; "so were we. But we have broken down; perhaps you will tell us about them this evening!"

"We never heard that there were any," replies Bellairs, with an unvarnished boyish bluntness. "We came to look for you; we understood that you had left word."

For once in her life Sarah looks a shade foolish.

Belinda, still standing, has remained looking, as if in absorption, at the waterfall. It is not much of one, after all. Its noise does not deafen you; its spray does not drench you; it is but a few feet that it plunges. But how snowy-clean is its foam! How agilely it springs down! How pleasant its voice! Like the voice of Undine calling to her false Huldbrand! What wondrous green ferns lip its waters!

"You said 'To Coniston!'" This is the murmur that comes to Belinda's ear. Is it the brook that utters it? She turns her head sharply away; but not before he has seen that the rowan-berries are scarcely redder than she.

And then (neither inviting, nor being invited) they saunter away together, as if

they would fain follow the stream to its springs in the mountain-lap. At least, they may lend it their company for a little while. Almost in silence they linger along, and gravely watch its lovely antics, as, in little cataracts and water-breaks and jumps, it sings and dances along in its jubilant old age (for how many centuries has it sung and capered?) that is so like youth!

"I wish I could think that I should wear as well!" said Mrs. Forth, with an excited laugh, sitting down on a grey stone beside the road that leads up to the copper-mines.

The sun has gone for awhile, and the fells look serious and careworn. They are old, too, like the brook; but they scarcely carry their years so well. He has thrown himself at her feet, that favourite symbolic attitude of his—body and soul, past, present, and future—is not he always there? In their ears is the booming of the mountain bees; and

the rivulet's warble. There is no longer an "*if*"!

"How long are you going to stay at Lowood?" she asks abruptly.

She had not meant to put the question, and bitterly regrets it when it is pronounced; but it forces itself out, in spite of her.

"I shall go when you tell me."

Her forehead contracts with a furrow of angry pain.

"You have no right to throw the decision upon me," she answers indignantly; "it is ungenerous. Why, are not you perfectly well able to judge for yourself?"

"Because——" he answers, looking full at her, and speaking steadily, though very low, "because I broke down once; what security have I that I should not break down again?"

Her eyes drop, and now the rowan-berries claim no kinship with her cheeks.

"That was *my* fault!" she answers faintly, turning dead-white.

"No!" he says slowly, yet with agitation, "it was not! Perhaps your being late that day may have accelerated it; but it would have come anyhow," with rising passion. "It would have come anyhow; how could it help coming? When I am with you," speaking with a sort of despair, "how can it ever help coming?"

Her hot fingers pick the cool mountain daisies.

"You must do as you think best!" she murmurs, half in tears.

How solemnly the hills are listening! The higher ones, indeed, are out of sight; so forwardly have grim Coniston Old Man's younger brothers thrust themselves before him.

From the bridge come sounds of rapturous manly merriment, which tell how far ahead of the banjo and its owner Sarah's tongue is triumphantly carrying her.

Rivers has raised himself into a sitting posture, and in his hand he is bruising and

crushing a bit of the dwarf bracken that grows beside them.

"You—you would give me another chance, then?" he says indistinctly; "you—you would let me try again?"

Is there any slightest doubt as to what her answer should be; and yet she hesitates.

"I—I—have so few friends," she answers, as if apologetically and sobbing; "as I have always told you, I do not know how to make friends! my life is so empty, and now that I am obviously perfectly recovered," with a sort of exasperation, "will no doubt be so long! You must do as you think best!"

He looks at her in a dumb agony for fully a hundred heart-beats. Does she know what she is asking of him? In her divine high innocence she does not understand. It is for him to understand for her! Her head is bent, and upon her white hands and whiter daisies one slow tear splashes. Until that tear it was possible to him! Until that tear!

"I must do as I think best?" he cries in passionate excitement, wholly carried away; "is that what you tell me? Then I think best to stay! The case is changed —it is not what it was then: I was taken by surprise. I was off my guard!—forewarned, forearmed, you know! Yes, it is quite safe now!"

"But is it?" she says, shuddering, too late terrified by the wildness of his look and the mad triumph of his eyes; "is it?"

* * * * *

Is it indeed? There has been a week in which to answer this question.

"It is putting one into such a disagreeable position!" says Mrs. Churchill pettishly.

The hour is the immediately after breakfast one; and she is sitting at the table, an open writing-case before her, papers and an hotel bill spread around. Her usual equable brow is ruffled. The

manager of the hotel has just left the room.

"Being apparently all of the same party, it is so difficult to explain that we are not responsible for his eccentricities," continues Mrs. Churchill in a tone of growing annoyance.

"Heaven has so obviously framed you for each other, that they cannot disabuse themselves of the idea that you are husband and wife," says Sarah in an amused voice from the window. "I saw incredulity in the manager's eye when you were laboriously explaining that he was your grandson-in-law; he wondered why, if you must tell a lie, you should tell such a bad one!"

"I fancy that there is not the most paltry item of his bill over which he does not haggle," says Mrs. Churchill indignantly. "It is too petty! it makes one quite hot! I am sure that they would gladly pay him to go away! Of course it will end in his driving *us* off! Oh, Belinda, my dear, are you there? I am sure I beg

your pardon; but what is said cannot be unsaid, and you really come into the room in such a creep-mouse way that one does not know whether you are in it or not!"

"It is not of the least consequence," replies Belinda, though her face burns. "I will certainly try to make more noise next time; and for the present, perhaps I am best away."

As she speaks she walks to the door, opens it, and closes it gently behind her; then deliberately mounts the stairs to her husband's attic. His occupation seems to be of somewhat the same nature as her grandmother's. At least, before him too, papers and a bill are spread.

"I was on the point of summoning you to my aid," he says, looking up as she enters; "I wished to consult you as to several of these items," indicating them with his long thin forefinger, "of which personally I have no knowledge whatever. A couple of stamps on the 15th, a bottle of Apollinaris water on the 18th, enve-

lopes on the 19th. May I ask whether these entries are correct, or whether they are due to carelessness on the part of the manager? in which case I shall of course at once take him to task, for such culpable oversight."

"I have no doubt that it is all right," still with that burning in her face; "what can it matter?"

"In my opinion it matters extremely," replies he sharply; "your memory can, at all events," again referring to the bill, "go back so far as yesterday? you can at least inform me whether or not you ordered a bottle of seltzer-water yesterday?"

"Yes," replies she, defiantly shrugging her shoulders—"two, three, half a dozen!"

He looks at her with a not altogether ill-founded exasperation.

"You are obviously resolved, for some unexplained reason, to thwart my purpose," he says slowly; "but it is of the less consequence, since I have made up my mind at once to leave this place, where

the scale of expenditure into which I am led—probably owing to a mistaken notion of my connection with your grandmother—is indubitably higher than I was taught to expect."

She has been looking straight before her, with a dogged *insouciance;* but at the mention of his purpose of departure that look vanishes, and her cheeks blanch.

"You mean to leave this place?" she says, in a low voice; "and yet," with irony, "wherever you go you will have to pay for the postage stamps I buy and the Apollinaris water I drink."

"It is not merely a question of expense," rejoins he, colouring faintly at her tone; "I have daily more reason to be convinced that the air of this place does not suit me; I have slept worse, and my palpitations have been sensibly severer since my arrival. I am aware that you always assume a look of incredulity when I allude to my maladies."

"Do I?" she answers, with a preoccu-

pied air, as if she were not thinking of what she was saying. "I beg your pardon; I did not mean it."

"I have written to engage rooms for to-morrow at the Lodore Hotel at the head of Derwentwater; a coach starts from here at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and——"

"Do you mean to say that we are to go —to leave this place—*to-morrow?*" she interrupts, with a sort of gasp.

Her eyes are dilated, and there is a roughness in her voice which she herself hears. He makes a sign of assent.

"It is *impossible!*" she says, speaking low and rapidly; "you have never asked my opinion; you have never consulted me. How can the air of one of these lakes differ from that of another? it is fancy—all fancy! As you said to me the other day, there is nothing that gains upon one so much by indulgence in them as valetudinarian fancies!"

He turns his eyes slowly from the bill,

on which they have been, until now, riveted, in painstaking search for errors, the discovery of which may diminish the total, and fixes them piercingly upon her.

"You seem to be unaccountably reluctant to quit this place," he says, very slowly; "why are you so much attached to it?"

There is that in his tone, or she thinks so, which is unlike anything she has ever heard in it before—that which at once strikes her murmurings dumb. But a passing frenzy seizes her, bidding her answer him, for once truly; tell him, in so many words, face to face, *why;* to throw the game up—have done with it! It is true that the longing for that lunatic relief is but short; a brief insanity that leaves her trembling and terror-struck—not at him, but at herself.

He has long removed his scrutiny from her face, and has been, for many minutes, re-immersed in his dissection of the bill, before she speaks; and when she does, it

is clear that he has no further insubordination to fear from her.

"The coach starts at eleven?" she says, in a very low voice. "I will be ready!"

So saying, she rises, and drags herself to the door.

"If you see a waiter, will you be good enough to tell him that I wish to speak to the manager?" says her husband, looking up; "they are apt to disregard my bell, and there are several of these items which I shall indisputably contest."

Having docilely fulfilled this commission, Mrs. Forth once more returns to her grandmother's sitting-room, and looks in.

"Is granny here?"

"She is not," replies Sarah, from her usual watch-tower, the window. "To tell you the truth, I have been giving her a little piece of my mind, as to her incivility to you; she knew as well as I did that you were in the room. I have been making her so angry," breaking into a

laugh, "by telling her that she is certainly growing a little deaf!"

Since the coast is clear, Belinda has entered, and sunk inertly into a chair.

"It *is* a little annoying for her, one must own," resumes Sarah, with an air of impartiality, "to be suspected of collusion with the economies of our friend upstairs; it would not be a bad thing if we could manage to establish the fact that there is no connection beyond a tender family affection between us and him!"

"You cannot be more anxious to prove it than he is," replies Belinda; but, as she speaks, no hot red wave of shame flows this time over her face; stronger emotions than that which had called it forth have too successfully driven the blood back to her heart; "but in any case you will not be troubled with him long!"

"Is he going to die?" cries Sarah, with extreme animation, leaving her post of observation, and hastening to her sister's side.

"He threatens that if he stays here he will!"

"I wonder is there anything really the matter with him?" says Sarah, in a tone of acute curiosity. "There is something very interesting about his diseases; I always regret not having utilized my former opportunities to learn more about them. I suppose there *must* be something odd about his heart, or the doctors he consulted would not have given him drops for it."

"And would not they have given him pills for his liver, or draughts for his spleen either?" asks Mrs. Forth bitterly. "Is not it a little improbable that *all* his organs have been hopelessly deranged for the last sixty years? No, no!" with a shrug, "you need not be alarmed; he will see us all out!"

"Then why are we not to be troubled with him long?" inquires Miss Churchill, puzzled.

"He imagines that this place disagrees

with him," replies Belinda, in a dull, flat voice; "and so we are to leave to-morrow for Derwentwater; to-morrow morning, by the coach that starts at eleven."

"And you have consented?" (very sharply, and with an accent of excessive astonishment).

Her sister's answer to this simple question seems not at once forthcoming. And when it does come, it is by no means a direct one.

"Sarah," she says slowly, and turning even whiter than she already is—though, indeed, that is scarcely needful—"do you remember once telling me that you were afraid I was going to the devil, and that I was taking"—a pause and a sort of gasp—"David Rivers with me?"

"Yes, I remember!" replies the other drily.

"Then why"—Mrs. Forth's voice has sunk to a whisper—"then why have you never told me so lately?"

Miss Churchill's eyebrows rise.

"My dear soul," she says bluntly, "you did not receive my first exhortation in such a spirit as to make me very anxious to hazard a second."

Belinda's head has sunk forward upon her chest.

"You were not very far wrong then!" she says faintly, "but you would be still nearer the truth now!"

There is a silence. Sarah has begun to march unquietly up and down the room, with her hands behind her. Perhaps the confession just made her does not partake much of the nature of a surprise. For there is less of astonishment than of genuine concern in her face.

"And you are going?" she says abruptly; "but who is to prevent his following you?"

Belinda's lip trembles.

"He will not, if I tell him not."

Her eyes wander wistfully away through the window to mountain and mere. The

high peaks are still withdrawn into the mystery of their morning vapours, but all the lovely lake is at play with the sun. To-morrow, to-morrow, he was to have rowed her on that lake!

Suddenly her attitude of subdued wretchedness changes to one of more violent pain.

"What am I thinking of?" she cries, starting up; "I had forgotten! I shall not see him again; he has been obliged to go to Milnthorpe to-day on business; and by the time he gets back to-morrow, we shall be gone! we shall be *gone!*"

"He will be after you by the next coach!" replies Sarah, with cynical good sense.

Belinda utters a low groan.

"I must write to him!"

"Do not!" cries Sarah dissuasively: "*never* write! Whatever else you give up, adhere to that one golden rule! In the length and breadth of Europe," says Miss Churchill, with a modest pride,

"there is not a square inch of my handwriting to be obtained!"

Once again Belinda moans.

"If I do not write, he will certainly find out where we have gone to; unless"—her eyes still taking that miserable farewell journey to the lake—"unless I leave word that we do not wish it known."

"That would scarcely do," rejoins Sarah drily; "it would be hardly advisable to take the waiters into our confidence."

A pause. Miss Churchill still pursuing her restless walk, and undistracted even by the strains of the banjo clearly heard from below, and the sound of a male, as well as a female voice, obviously accompanying it.

"I suppose," she says by-and-by, sighing impatiently, "that the end of it is, it will devolve upon me: our *rôles* are reversed. All my life I have been asking you to undertake disagreeable commissions for me, and now I must do you the same kind office. I suppose that *I* must tell him?"

"*You?*" cries Belinda, wheeling suddenly round, a passionate dissent from this proposal in voice and eyes, and with a new rush of her lately dormant old and senseless jealousy; "why *you?*"

"Would you prefer granny?" asks Sarah quietly. "Some one must tell him; you can hardly suppose that I very greedily covet the office!"

At the cool rationality of her sister's words, Belinda's rebel blood slowly subsides again, and her head sinks once more upon her breast. How thin these floors are! One can hear each word of the idiotic melody warbled by Bellairs and the girl in red; but Miss Churchill never flinches. Belinda is the first to speak, though it is not at once easy to comprehend the drift of her words, so unsure and muffled is her voice.

"You will tell him as kindly as you can?"

"Do you think it will kill him?" replies Sarah, with a touch of sarcasm; "if you

remember, you thought that his father's death would kill him, but it did not! Pooh! They take more killing than that!"

CHAPTER IV.

"Often, however, was there a question present to me: should some one now at the turning of that corner blow thee suddenly out of Space into the other world, or no-world, by pistol-shot, how were it?"

THE wrench is accomplished. The coach that starts at eleven o'clock has started. Within the close precincts of its interior, it has carried away, among other persons, the cautiously-enveloped figure of Professor Forth; and among its mackintoshed and umbrellad outside passengers, it reckons his wife.

"I never was so glad of anything in my life," says Mrs. Churchill, walking briskly back to the fire from the rain-blurred window, whence she has been waving

adieux of accented tenderness to her descendants.

"Not even when you first hailed him as grandson?" asks Sarah caustically.

Mrs. Churchill reddens.

"Poor soul!" says the girl, with an accent of heartfelt compassion, following with her eyes the departing vehicle.

"I never can understand why you should pity her!" retorts the elder woman, with irritation; "there is no greater mistake than to measure everyone by one's own foot-rule."

"I suppose that without offence to anyone, I may pity her for getting extremely wet," replies Sarah surlily.

And certainly, on this count, Mrs. Forth, by the time of her arrival at the Lodore Hotel, does deserve as much compassion as she can get. Stiff and drenched, she has climbed down from her perch. Pouring as is the day, the coach has been crowded. Belinda's ribs on each side feel indented with the continued nudging of her companions'

elbows; and there has been such a cordial interchange of drips between all the umbrellas, that it would have been a sensibly drier course to have taken no umbrellas at all. Upon the tarpaulin that covers the luggage, lakes of water have collected, which, at each fresh jolt of the coach, discharge themselves refreshingly upon the passengers' knees. As far as any glimpse of mountain that the blanket-clouds have allowed them to obtain is concerned, they might as well have been in Holland. Dunmail Raise, Skiddaw, Saddleback—what have they been but various names for the one huge white pelt? It is a grand day for the becks—the foaming, jumping, brimful becks, and they are the only cheerful things she has seen; they, and the long lythrums growing lushly beside them.

"You have no one to blame but yourself," says Professor Forth, emerging, dry and warm, from the steaming interior, and severely regarding his half-drowned wife; "had you taken my advice——"

"I blame no one," she interrupts, apathetically; "there is no great harm in being wet; it is very easy to get dry again!"

"You have every appearance of having taken a chill," scrutinizing her shivering figure with an angry solicitude that might appear the outcome of an anxious affection; "it would be extremely vexatious if, thanks to a mere caprice on your part, you were to be so soon again laid up. I must insist upon your at once drinking a glass of hot brandy-and-water as a preventive!"

"I have taken no chill," she answers faintly, but she obeys with a dull acquiescence.

There is no draught he could offer her, from Socrates' hemlock upwards or downwards, that she would not think it less trouble to take than to refuse. The rain pours on and on, all through the *table-d'hôte*, all through the long, long evening. There is a public drawing-room to which, after dinner, the other guests betake them-

selves, shawl-wrapped, grumbling, and uttering aspirations for a fire. Belinda has not the heart to accompany them. She climbs the stairs to her bedroom in the roof, although at eight o'clock it is scarcely possible to go to bed. No sense, indeed, of the prematureness of the hour prevents her flying to the blessed keeping of sleep; but the knowledge that whatever moments are filched from consciousness now, will be asked back with usury in the grey morning hours—those grim, grey hours that only the tiny minority of the quite happy and the completely innocent dare face.

Her window is open, and looks to the back; to the wooded hill rising so immediately behind the house that it seems as if, with outstretched hand, one might touch it. The rain swishes past: now and then, when the freakish gust takes it, swishes in. She sits down on her bed and listens to it. For two hours she will listen to its swishing; and then, perhaps, she may dare give

herself—tired body and sick heart—to slumber. With the rain mixes the never-ceasing noise of the waterfall. On a sultry summer night no doubt it is sweet and lulling, falling coolly beneath the stars; but it seems to treble, to centuple the dreariness of this inclement drenching evening, cold as winter, and without winter's palliatives of thick curtains and blazing logs. It gets upon her nerves at last. It seems as if she must stop it for one instant or die. If its wet din would fill her brain, indeed, as it fills her ears, crowding out other presences, she would thank it, and bless it on her knees; but, on the contrary, its clamour seems to make thought sharper, memory intenser, fancy wilder. With what a dreadful liveliness does she rehearse—set to the murderous monotony of its tune—the scene of Rivers' back-coming to-morrow! It grows at last so hideously real that she asks herself in bewilderment, "Has she really seen—is she really seeing it?"

She passes her hand across her forehead and rubs her eyes. In what room of the hotel—in which often-trodden spot by wave-lipped mere will the blow fell him? How will he take it? Will it kill him? She laughs aloud. "Pooh! as Sarah says, 'they take more killing than that!' And how much killing will she herself take?" This Sarah has never told her. How much of this slow death? A great, great deal! Was ever anyone so full of obstinate life as she? Other women—women who prayed to live, women with little children's chubby arms about their necks, with passionate, fond husbands, wetting their faint hands with good-bye tears—would have died of such an illness as hers. She, childless, hated and hating, has survived. A sense of impotent, dark rebellion fills her soul. Of what use to save her alive? What sense in it? To save her alive in order to show her just one small glimpse of what life might have been, and then to hurl her back into what life is! What life

might have been! Oh, the terrible vividness of that vision!

She has fallen sideways upon her bed, which, as well as her whole body, is shaken with the force of her silent sobs. They must be silent, for the walls are thin, and her husband's attic is next door.

"If we had once belonged to each other," she says, with a violent agony of emphasis, "even if afterwards I had seen him struck dead at my feet, still, I should have known what is the very best thing that life holds; I could have said, 'I have lived!' but now I shall lie down in my grave, knowing that there has always been something immeasurably better than anything I know, just beyond me!"

After that, she lies quite still, a sort of numb calm succeeding the hurricane, and outside the rain swirls always, and the waterfall tumbles. There must be more of soothing properties in their joint sound than she gives them credit for, since by-

and-by their sullen music grows dim in her ears, and she sleeps.

She awakes in the early morning, forlorn and cold, to find that she has lain all night fully dressed, outside her bed. She is down in good time, and stands outside the hall-door, waiting for breakfast to be announced. The rain has ceased. The wind has torn and hurled the clouds apart, and let the sun look through; and also swept clear little intensely blue islands in the sky. The shadows are flying, speedy as dreams, along Skiddaw's flanks, and Derwentwater lies—all billowy and disturbed—at the foot of her girdling fells. On the bit of marshy grass that intervenes between Belinda and the lake, several horses are grazing, and two rolling. One cannot roll quite over, which seems to annoy him.

"I hope that you are recovered from the effects of your yesterday's imprudence," says a voice at her elbow.

She starts.

"There were not any to recover from," she answers, with a shrug.

"In that case," says her husband stiffly, "and since you have every appearance of being in other respects perfectly restored to health, I think I am justified in proposing that you should return to your normal habits, which have been for so long, and at such great inconvenience to myself, interrupted."

Belinda smiles slightly. She is well aware that it is only the presence of her grandmother and Sarah that has, up to this time, prevented the pack-saddle from being replaced upon her back. It is being now, at the earliest opportunity, strapped on again. Well, what matter?

"I perfectly agree with you," she answers hastily. "I have not the shadow of an excuse for any further idleness. After such a holiday," catching her breath in a sigh, "a little work will do me good."

But people's ideas as to what a little work is, differ.

"I need scarcely tell you," says the Professor, when, after the *table-d'hôte* breakfast, he and she have mounted to his bedroom, which, as at Lowood, is also his study—" indeed, it has once or twice struck me with surprise that the idea of a spontaneous offer of assistance should not have occurred to you—that my correspondence is very seriously in arrears; moderate application, however, will to-day reduce it in a great degree to order. I have briefly indicated, upon each letter, the tenour of the answer I wish drawn up."

As he speaks, he places before her a large pile of docketed letters. If any dismay at its height and breadth enters her soul, she swallows it down in silence. The sun comes forth in summer strength, but though the room is not a tenth part as large as the Professor's Oxbridge study, the window is as rigorously closed as ever it was there. The garret, like her own, looks to the back, and in it there is no escape from the waterfall's loud pouring.

She is still teased by that maniac notion that she must make it stop or die. Unused, for the past couple of months, to close air, to confinement, to toil, her head soon begins to ache, sometimes swims, burns always, but she makes no complaint.

The clock strikes one; she hears cheerful voices, and steps trooping down the passage outside to luncheon. The Professor is no great advocate of luncheon, even when he can eat it at some one else's expense; at an hotel he simply ignores the possibility of its existence. But she cannot complain. He is willing to share with her such hospitality as he extends to himself. Biscuits bought at a shop in Ambleside, so that there may be no danger of their figuring in the hotel bill, and weak brandy-and-water—the brandy also his own. She declines the brandy, would fain decline the biscuits too; to eat in such an air, and with such a heavy head, seems impossible, but she dreads being scolded for her sickliness if she refuse.

Two o'clock strikes! Three! Half-past three! Four! Even now her pile seems scarce perceptibly diminished. Two or three times she has been thrown back, by having to draw up a fresh draft, her muddled brain and wandering thoughts having led her to mistake the sense of his directions. Hopeless tears fill her eyes, as she tears across each sheet and begins another. As the clock strikes four, the pen drops from her numbed fingers.

"I think you must excuse me," she says faintly. "I—I—do not feel very well!"

"Not well?" returns he sharply; "then your indisposition is, of course, attributable to the chill you contracted yesterday!"

"The chill?" replies she, laughing hysterically, and pressing her hot hands to her throbbing forehead. "The *chill?* Oh, how delightful it would be to have a chill! No, no! it is only the old story! It is only that I have broken down again!"

"Impossible!" he cries angrily; "in that case, your health can never have been really re-established!"

"I suppose not," assents she dully. "Well, may I go?"

"Why do you ask?" retorts he waspishly, and regarding with a dissatisfied air her uncompleted task. "Do I ever put any check upon your actions? I merely reserve to myself the right of requesting that you will not incur the risk of contracting another chill."

She is very willing to buy her liberty at the price of this most unnecessary promise. At what price would not she buy air, the liberty to gasp, the privilege—beyond all value—of being alone? Without much thought, she has taken, on leaving the hotel, the Borrowdale road, walks along it for some distance, confused and woolly-headed, conscious only of the relief of having temporarily escaped from suffocation—from the waterfall—from *him!* But by-and-by the loveliness around her

wakes her again—wakes her to new and keener sufferings. She is aware of the road that winds in gentle companionship with the windings of the Derwent; she is aware of the marvellous coloured water, tinted a strange fair green by the stones in its bed, and clear as the crystal stream in the Apocalypse.

Above, the great crags rear their steepy heads; the Castle Crag that, at one point, seems to block the valley, guarding hid treasures behind it, and saying austerely, "You shall not pass me!" the Gate Crag, that looks down, benignant though awful, on the prattle of the river curling round its feet, looks down with its solemn purple-grey rock-shelves and sheer slopes of slate.

As she nears a village, she turns off a road to the left, and begins to climb the hill. She proposes to herself no goal. She does not know where she is, or whither she is going. She only knows that each step takes her farther from the waterfall,

and from *him.* Climbing, climbing, climbing, through a wood, up a mountain path, until at length, panting, she attains the hill-crest, and turning, looks back upon all the beauty and majesty of Borrowdale. But even here she only halts to cast one breathless glance at the great hills, thrown about as if in Titan play, and looking over each other's shoulders, silent, wondrously-coloured, august! She is not far away enough, even yet. With knees that tremble and give beneath her—for she has been but little used to such a walk—a walk undertaken, too, almost fasting—she descends the hill on the other side; and at its foot finds a most lonely tarn, here, in the heart of the fells.

A little ale-house, lonely too, sits near it, backed by three or four storm-wrecked Scotch firs; and around, the fells lift their harsh faces, scored by the channels of their winter weepings. She asks the stout housewife at the little inn for a drink of milk; but she does not inquire where she is, nor

in which direction Lodore lies. She would far rather not know. She has lost her way, and will be late for the *table-d'hôte!* Well? He will be imagining that she has contracted some new and expensive chill! *Well?* She may go astray upon the mountains, and perish like the sheep in winter! WELL? The milk has a little revived her flagging powers; and she walks on again. Whither? She neither knows nor cares. She only knows that she is among friends—among the stern, yet summer-softened hills that lend her the sympathy of their silence; among the crisp and frolic mountain airs, and the beds of bog-myrtle that smells of bay-leaves; while—friendliest of all—blithe comforter and comrade—a mountain beck tinkles, a hand-breadth off, beside her. But there is a limit even to the sustaining powers of a cup of milk; and by-and-by she sinks down, faint and spent, by that flower-lipped brook, upon the dainty bed of ferns and sundews with which it is set round.

Why should she ever move hence again? What inducement is there to her ever again to lift up her tired limbs and leave the mute society of these bald limestone crags and steeps of shingle and flint? Whither could she go to better herself? In what direction on earth's broad face does any good for her lie? Why should not she lie down and die here? *Die!* But is it such an easy thing to die? Has not she already tried hard and failed? Oh, if she could but gently depart here now! Surely no one could ever wish for a sweeter, fragranter death-bed!

She stretches herself back upon the bog-myrtle and sundews, and closes her eyes, trying to fancy that it is over, and that she *is* dead. Oh, if she might but be gently spunged out of being! It seems such a small thing to ask, and yet she might as well bid the mountains bow down and the sun make obeisance to her. She asks for no other life instead. Has her experience of this one been so pleasant

that she is greedy for more? If there be another world, what security is there that it is a better one? May not it resemble this? the same long hopes that go gradually, sickeningly out; the same poniard-stabs of recollection thrusting one through in the hour of the uncoloured dawn; the same tiny, weakling joys!

She has raised herself from her recumbent attitude, and her head is bowed forwards upon her knees, which her long arms embrace. Neither by death nor by life is there any escape for her! But there is a mode of outlet for her nearer at hand than she wots of. It is noiseless walking upon the fine mountain herbage; there the heaviest foot falls mutely—so noiseless that until he who has been approaching her stoops and most gently touches her on the shoulder, she is unaware that anyone is nigh. She springs up staggeringly, with a loud cry.

"*You!*"

"Yes, *I!*"

It seems as if she had spent all her breath on that one monosyllable, since, for a while, nothing more comes; then, at last, a gasping whisper:

"Did not—Sarah—tell you?"

"Yes; she told me."

Her breath comes hard and laboured. How is it possible to interpose any words between such heart-beats? At last:

"You—have—always bragged about your obedience to me," she says slowly; "you have always boasted of doing what I told you—is *this* doing what I told you?"

He offers no exculpation. He only stands doggedly before her, white and burning-eyed, but not trembling.

"This—it—is," she says, with that same slow intensity—"this—it—is—to throw yourself upon a man's generosity!"

His lips twitch, but his eyes are still dogged.

"I will go at your bidding; I will go at no one else's!"

She looks distractedly round at her silent friends—the scarped slopes, where the lady-birch finds difficult footing, but yet keeps her place, and hangs her delicate tresses: in her sore need she consults the beck, but the hills are speechless; and though the beck talks fast, she cannot distinguish the meaning of its words.

"I will go if you tell me; and I will stay if you tell me!"

Her look still wanders wildly; and her ear detects the sound of a little oozing runlet, lost hitherto in the noise of its elder brother; a runlet filtering through the red moss on the hillside.

"Which shall it be? go or stay?"

His voice, that hitherto her lightest word has awed into silence, presses, imperatively asking, upon her hearing. (Which shall it be? *Which? which?*) Oh, if some one would but answer for her! If mountain or runlet would but take the responsibility of that one all-weighty word off her? *Go?* Leave her to drag her tired limbs back

into that bondage which seems already to have endured for centuries? and for a limit to whose mean and sordid sufferings eye and heart consult the long future in vain.

"*I am waiting! which shall it be?*"

Hideous future! Hideous past! Hideous present! She has given it a fair trial. No one can say that she has not given it a fair trial.

"*Which?*"

And she has broken down; mind and body her tyrant has broken her down. He will break her down again if she give him the chance. Why should she? It has been his turn hitherto! Let it be hers now!

"WHICH?" His voice is no longer dogged; heart-rendingly urgent only. "WHICH?" He has taken her hand, and has laid its palm upon his burning eyes. "*Which shall it be? go or stay?*"

Her look, staring yet unseeing, is fixed upon the little zigzag green paths on the

fell, worn by the small feet of the mountain sheep. Not a bird's voice breaks the silence of the hills.

"It—shall—be—*stay!*" she says, almost inaudibly.

Before his eyes the sun dances, and the steady hills go round. Yet, mixed with a joy so awful and utter that his whole strong frame reels beneath its weight, there comes too a pain keen to agony. He has prevailed. His high goddess has fallen from her pedestal, and it is he that has dragged her down! Her divine fair head lies in the dust, and it is he that has laid it there!

"Do you know what you are saying?" he cries, in suffocating excitement. "Sometimes I think that you say things of which you do not understand the meaning! Do you understand what '*stay*' means? It does not mean 'Stay to-day, and go to-morrow;' it means 'Stay *always*, ALWAYS, ALWAYS!' it is *all or nothing* for which I am asking. Do you understand? Which?"

She draws a long heavy breath, as one recovering from a deep swoon.

"*All!*" she answers, whispering; and so breaks into an exceeding bitter cry of anguish and revolt: "*I will not die without having lived!*"

Then, indeed, the pain goes, swallowed up and stifled in the enormity of his gladness. He knows that hereafter it will return, but now he is only, *only* glad! Great God! how glad! He has thrown himself down before her, and is kissing her tired feet, and clasping her knees. But when he seeks to gather her into his arms, she pushes him convulsively away.

"No! no!" she says wildly; "not now!"

"What!" he cries, with a hideous revulsion of feeling; "you have been fooling me, then! you are not in earnest!"

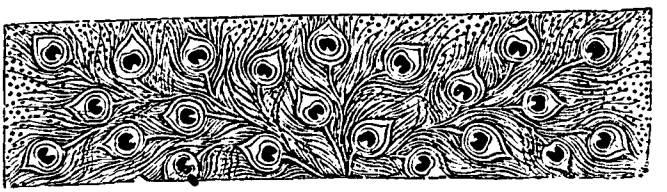
"*Not in earnest!*" she says, with a heart-broken smile; "do you think that I am *joking?* Cannot you understand that I have fallen low enough for *one* day?"

Her voice dies away, and her head sinks on her breast. His high Queen! Already she looks discrowned and dissceptred. By-and-by she lifts her haggard face and speaks.

"We must be going home," she says dully.

He complies in silence, and they set out. Before they have gone far, one of those swift changes, so common in mountain weather, has sent a sharp storm driving in their faces. She is unprovided with umbrella or mackintosh, and the large drops soon saturate her light gown. He puts his arm in anxious protection round her. Her first impulse is to shrink away from him; but, bethinking herself, she tamely submits.

"Shall I stick at such a trifle—*I*, that stick at nothing?"



CHAPTER V.

'This wrong world.'

IT is evening. Professor Forth's chilliness has for once vanquished his parsimony; and in the grate of his attic room, a small, carefully-nursed, never-poked fire burns sparingly cheerful. But he cowers over it, and stretches his hand to its frugal blaze alone. One would have thought that such a walk as that undertaken by Mrs. Forth would have been enough to satisfy the energies of any reasonable woman; and yet she is again out of doors. She is not walking, indeed; she is standing upon the rustic bridge that leads to wood and water-

fall; standing there in the soft dusk—not alone!

They have passed the windows of the garishly-lit public drawing-room, where lamps and jets of gas are making a gaudy glare; a heterogeneous assemblage of people, forced into unnatural sociability, irksomely driving through an evening in common. Some are working; some are playing whist; some are yawning; one is feebly singing; and all are in the fullest blaze of the gas and the paraffin. How much better to be outside in the moist, sweet dark! His arms are about her, she no longer resisting; and her tired head is resting on his shoulder.

Henceforth she will always have that shoulder on which to lay down her head. What matter, wading through what waters she has reached its refuge? A throb of mad, reckless joy thrills through all her uneasy body. Since she is to pay the price—and such a price!—let her at least have some joy to show for it! Oh, if it

were but all right!—all on the straight!—what could heaven do better than this? Ay! but the might of that "if"!

"And you *must* go?" she says sighingly; "you think it is quite unavoidable; you *must?*"

"I must!" he answers, in a tone as grudging as hers; "there is no help for it; there are"—hesitating—"there are arrangements to be made—that I must make personally—that could not be done by writing; and I must also go to Milnthorpe, to see about my work."

She has raised her head.

"It—this—will not make any difference to your work?" she asks rapidly, and in a tone of acute alarm; "it—it will not injure your prospects?"

"Of course not; of course not!" he answers, in a tone of feverish reassurance; "why should it? what connection is there between a man's private life and his business relations? What concern is it of theirs whether or not I—I——"

"You run away with your neighbour's wife," she says, in a low, hard voice, finishing his sentence; "why do not you speak out? if a thing is not too bad to do, it is not too bad to say!"

But through the dark he divines the agony of the blush that accompanies her words; and again that sword-like pain, which had marred the first moments of his triumphant bliss, once more traverses his heart. There is not a breath of air. What has become of yesterday's hustling north wind? By the starlight they can dimly see that the clouds no longer fold the mountain-heads. They have dropped to their waists, and airily girdle them.

She is resting her feverish hands on the wooden railing, wet with the recent showers, and looking down on the half-seen shining rocks, and the water flashing white in the semi-darkness. How pleasant is its continuous rush and low roar; and yet there is something oppressive in it; something that makes one out of breath!

"You will not be long away?" she says, with a passionate wistfulness; "you will not leave me long alone? you will come back as soon as you can?"

"Need you tell me that?"

There is almost derision in his tone. He has drawn her back to her former resting-place, and is most soothingly and half timidly caressing her hair. Not yet can he realize that it is the glorious proud head which has always seemed farther above him than the stars, that is lying in prone abandonment on his shoulder.

"You will not despise me more than you can help?" she whispers, with a sob; dark as it is, hiding her face on his breast. "Of course you *must* despise me; but you will try and hide it as well as you can, will not you?"

Are his wits wandering? Can this be his divine and lofty lady, preferring this miserable prayer? Can this be he, blasphemously listening to it?

"How *am* I to get through these days?"

she moans, clinging to him; "oh, come quickly back! come quick! quick! How am I to look him in the face without telling him what I am planning against him? if he says one kind word to me, it will be the death of me! Happily for me, he never does!"

For all answer, he only strains her more desperately to his heart. What words can he find with which to console her? Surely that silent embrace, strongly enveloping her with its love and its pity, is best.

"I shall be always fancying that you are growing tired of me," she says, still whispering, and her speech broken by dry sobs; "promise not to grow tired of me! promise! Remember that I shall have nothing—*nothing* but you in the whole wide world; and that when you are gone from me, *everything* will be gone! But what is the use of making you promise?" with a despairing change of key; "how can you help it? If you grow tired of me, you

will grow tired; and there will be an end of it!"

She has pulled herself out of his arms; and now stands apart from him, as if in prophetic renunciation. He puts up his hand to his head as if his brain were turning.

"When you say such things," he cries incoherently, "you make me feel as if my senses were gone! *I* grow tired of *you! I! I!* Oh, my love, my lady, my Queen!" falling down at her feet, and kissing the hem of her gown, as if no humility of posture could adequately express the abasement of his soul before her; "if you knew how I am eating my heart out with the thought that *you* may grow tired of *me!* that you may find out I am not worthy of the sacrifice you are making for me!—that *I*, only *I!*—oh my poor love! my poor love!—may not be enough for you!"

He stops, choked, pressing his head against her trembling knees; and his

scalding tears filter through her gown. The intensity of his emotion calms her a little. At all events, he is not tired of her *yet!* She stoops, and lays her hand almost protectingly upon his head.

"Yes!" she says; "you will be enough!" But in the dusk her face looks livid, and she ends her sentence with a sob.

The next morning he goes—goes, leaving her to live through as best she may, the days that must intervene before his return. How—by what process as yet unconjectured by her—is she to live through them? They will pass, of course. No day has yet dawned upon sad humanity that did not pass; even Damiens' death-day passed. But how? The weather, at all events, will not come to her help. It has changed from capricious showers back to such headstrong, hopeless rain as accompanied their drive from Lowood. There will be no seeking escape in mountain walks; no tiring down thought by tired muscles.

"How *am* I to live through them?" she says, as she stands alone, at the window of her husband's room, staring vacantly through the smeared pane, which baffles sight, and waiting for him to be ready to begin work.

He has entered the room without her perceiving it. Has she spoken her last words aloud? She hardly knows.

"What are you looking at?" he asks.

She gives a great start.

"I—I—am looking at the rain!"

"I hope that you will content yourself with looking at it," retorts he drily. "I must exact a promise from you that you will not, by exposing yourself to it, incur the danger of that relapse with which you were obviously threatened yesterday."

"I promise," she answers docilely.

Since she is going to be guilty of this one enormous treason against him, she may at least pay him the mint, and anise, and cummin of any tiny obedience that comes in her way.

"But I shall have no temptation," she adds feverishly. "I want to work to-day: I am up to a great deal of work. You need not be afraid of overworking me to-day!"

(It is an uncalled-for caution! He has never been at all afraid of overworking her.) And yet, indeed, it is from him, and not from her, that the first suggestion of an interval from labour comes. The afternoon is four hours old, and the faint smell of the brandy-and-water that temperately irrigated the Professor's luncheon is beginning to die out of the close room, when:

"Your writing has become unsteady," he says, looking critically over her shoulder; "I presume that your hand is growing tired. Perhaps we had better desist until to-morrow."

"No! no!" she cries vehemently; "why should we? I am not at all tired! it was only carelessness. I will take more pains."

"You are unable any longer to concen-

trate your attention," he says, pursuing his examination; "you have omitted two most important words."

"Have I?" she answers remorsefully; "but indeed I am not tired! I had much rather go on; there—there is no time like the present!"

"To-morrow," he begins; but she interrupts him.

"*To-morrow!*" she repeats feverishly; "who knows what may happen to-morrow? We may both be dead to-morrow!"

The Professor dislikes the mention of death.

"Psha!" he says crossly; "what is the use of indulging in puerile suppositions?"

But she has her will. Until the hour of dinner she toils on. She has not, indeed, attained her end—that state of numb woolliness to which yesterday a less portion of labour had brought her. To-day, overwork has had the contrary effect of sharpening to its highest capability every power of thought, memory, and imagination.

She goes down to the *table d'hôte* alone. The Professor, labouring under some real or fancied accession to his ailments, has (having, however, previously taken care to notify in good time his intention) restricted himself to the delight of a basin of gruel over his own fire. Belinda is placed at dinner beside a couple who had been fellow-inmates with her of the Lowood Hotel, and who, like her, had come on hither. She had been on terms of friendly civility with them, and they now express pleasure at having again met her, and try to draw her into conversation. But she repulses all their efforts with a surly brevity. They shall not have to say afterwards that she let them talk to her.

And now the day—*one* day—is ended, and it is night. Oh, these nights! Dreadful are they—dream-haunted, nightmare-ridden! and yet neither dream nor nightmare are comparable for horror to their waking moments. And through them all, the waterfall pours, pours, in its maddening

monotony. Sometimes she feels as if she *must* tell some one; *must* rush out to some of the sleeping strangers and tell them! Perhaps it would not sound so bad if it were told! After all, such things happen every day. Her loss will be no loss to her husband; an economy rather!

She laughs bitterly. He will be glad to be rid of her. Has not everybody with whom she has lived hitherto been glad to be rid of her? Could her grandmother contain her joy at having shaken her off? Professor Forth, too, will be glad to be rid of her. By-and-by, *he* will be glad to be rid of her! Oh, the despair of that thought! She will see him growing tired of her! Loyal gentleman as he is, he will try his best to hide it; but he will not hide it from her! She will be jealous of the very air for touching his face; every day she will ask herself, "Is he *quite* the same? Is he *quite* as glad to see me as he used to be? Does he call me his darling quite as often as he did?"

She will see his love slowly sliding—sliding away from her. What will she have to bind him to her? Not honour, for she will have cast off honour; not real love, for real love goes only with respect, and she will have said good-bye to respect; she will have shaken hands with shame. The cold sweat of agony stands on her brow. Whether or not there be a hell elsewhere, she has found hers here.

The last day has come; the last of the three that are to intervene between his going and the morning when she is to meet him at Keswick railway station, bidding, for his sake, farewell to husband, friends, and good repute.

Two nights such as the one I have described; two days which, though inferior in agony, seem yet to have been crammed as full of mental suffering as they can hold, have brought her to the verge of a nervous fever. At the lightest noise it seems as if she must scream out loud. She is, as usual, at her toil in her hus-

band's room. She has changed her position, so that she may not see him as she writes; so bitter is the remorse with which the sight of his withered face and shrunk figure fills her. Poor old man! What has he done to her, that she should deal him this murderous blow?—for a murderous blow it is to his honour, if not to his heart. By what right is she stabbing him in the dark? Because he is old, sickly, and peevish? Was not he all three—did not she know him to be all three—when she married him? How little he suspects her! Exacting and undemonstrative he may be, but how perfect is his confidence in her!

"You look feverish," he says.

There is, or she fancies it, a tone of kindness, almost compassion, in his voice; and in a moment she has fallen on her knees. It is not too late, even yet! She will tell him all.

"What the deuce are you about?" cries he acrimoniously. It is very seldom that

he employs even so small an oath as the one recorded; and his present indulgence in it is a measure of his irritation. "You have let fall a great blot of ink upon Gregory Nazianzen!"

For a moment she still kneels there, stunned; then, slowly recovering her senses, and healed completely of her impulse towards confession:

"I beg your pardon," she says, stammering; "I—I had dropped something. I—I—was going to look for it!"

The hours pass by. They seem at once to crawl and to rush. With no one but her husband does Belinda exchange a word. She has sufficiently snubbed into silence, and rejected with eager rudeness, the efforts of the civil visitors; who, attracted by her beauty, and compassionating her apparent loneliness (the Professor has adhered to his *régime* of solitude and gruel), have tried to include her in their talk. She has harshly rebuffed a little child, who, encouraged by former notice,

has run up to make friends with her. None of them shall be able to say afterwards that she forced her company upon them—that company which they will then look upon as pollution.

The dinner hour is near, and she is standing outside the hotel door, drawing long gasping breaths. Is it a little easier to live out of doors than in? It has been another wet day; the sun has been neither seen nor heard of; but now, so near the hour of his daily dying, he asserts himself. From beneath a lead-heavy pile of rain-clouds he is thrusting his head; but his radiance is tempered to a weird, moony splendour. About the hills' necks are thrown cobwebby kerchiefs of vapour; and to all these he lends a nameless pale opulence. In the sky he builds up an aërial city, augustly fair as that one seen in trance at Patmos; and on the waters his sovran feet have trodden a straight path of quivering diamond. Across this royal path a little boat has the presump-

tion to take its course; and at once is harmonized into a solemn unity with the transfigured water and the mountain pinnacles—pinnacles as of the great City of God.

Belinda looks at it all with a wild, dry eye, and a choked throat. Oh, beautiful, cruel, terrible world! Would not it be easier to endure if it were ugly and unsightly? if there were not this horrible contrast between its fair shows and its hideous realities? The sight is of such strange loveliness that at every window of the hotel heads are thrust out to admire it. A little group of people have followed Mrs. Forth's example, and issued out into the road. The lady with whom she had been on friendly terms at Lowood is standing near, and addresses her.

"Why will you never speak to us now?" she asks, in a wondering voice; "I am afraid," laughing a little, "that you must think that there is something wrong about us; that we have run away, perhaps, and

are not married! Mamma met some people like that at Spa last year; it was so awkward, for she had made quite friends with them!"

She stops abruptly, for the woman she addresses has turned ghastly, unaccountably pale. The evening is one of extraordinary stillness. On the satiny water the heavens lie exactly copied, cloud for cloud, clear sky-field for clear sky-field! That strange pallid effulgence—lessened indeed, fainting away by slow degrees into obscurity—is yet still there; an effulgence not of the gold and carmines and purples that one usually associates with sunset; but of a paler, whiter, lunar quality.

Again those sobs rise in her throat. Oh, lovely, ironical world! when will you cease jeering us in our misery? And now it is night. She has gone to bid her husband good-night. Often, on previous occasions, she has omitted this ceremony as nugatory; but now a morbid impulse to be at

all events lacking in no little dues of courtesy towards him, possesses her.

She finds him sitting stooped over his hearth, with his empty gruel-basin beside him, and his fleshless hands absorbing the last warmth of the expiring fire.

"I have come to say good-night."

"Have you? Good-night."

Now that the ceremony is concluded, it is clear that he expects her to retire; but still she lingers, and again that longing to fall on her knees and tell him all sweeps over her. Poor old man! How old and feeble and lonely he looks!

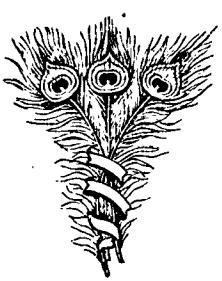
"You are not ill?" she says, unsteadily.

"According to you, I am never ill," replies he drily; "I enjoy the most robust health; if I were to tell you that I were ill, you would discredit the assertion!"

"Oh, but I should not," she cries, remorsefully; "I quite believe that you often, often suffer. Is there—is there—nothing I can do for you?"

"You can shut the door," replies he,

with a snarl; "a thing that, since the beginning of my acquaintance with you, I have never known you do! and since it is already past my usual hour for retiring to bed, I will ask you to shut it upon the *outside!*"



CHAPTER VI.

"Look up! There is a small bright cloud
Alone amid the skies;
So high, so pure, and so apart,
A woman's honour lies.",

AND now the night has to be faced. With what dread has she watched the slow declension of the summer evening; but no dread comes up to the reality, to the miserable endless hours of hand-to-hand fighting with the terrible battalions of thought and remorses, that come up, ever fresh and fresh, against her; that, while all around her are softly sleeping, take her by the throat in the blackness, and will not let

her go. To no dream or nightmare, indeed, does she give the opportunity to torment her, for she makes no attempt to sleep. Fully dressed, widely, burningly awake, she sits all night writing, writing, writing endless letters of farewell to him, who, parted from her only by a flimsy lath-and-plaster partition, lies tossing in the light and uneasy dozes of old age. How many does she write? They must be a score, at least; prayers for forgiveness, cries of remorse; and no sooner are they written than she tears them all. Prayers for forgiveness of a wrong that is unforgivable! Cries of remorse for a sin that her action shows she has not really repented of! Why insult him by such? The dawn has come by the time that she has at length written the three lines which, without reading over—if she read them over, she knows that she would tear them too—she feverishly folds and places in an envelope. In them there is neither petition nor repentance.

"I am going to leave you for always. You cannot think that I have been a worse wife to you than I think myself."

"BELINDA."

To have toiled all night for such an outcome! She walks to the window, feeling stiff and chilled. The morning is bringing all night's secrets to light. Again the wooded hill rises a hand-breadth off; the little patch of sky that it allows her to see is putting on day's blue livery.

Well, then, it has come! There is no going back now! no more shilly-shallying! There is nothing for it but to make the best of it! She has turned from the window, and accidentally faced herself in the glass. What a spectacle! What heavy smouches under the eyes! What baked white lips! But in her face, is there something else, too? something new and unqualifiable? Is it already beginning to assume that pitiful, brazen look, that women such as she wear? Well, if it is,

what wonder? If it is, there is no help for it!

The time is so short—so short now! Surely for that short time she can manage to keep thought at bay? She moves noiselessly about, busying herself with this and that. She takes off her wedding-ring, and making it and the few paltry trinkets that her husband has ever given her into a small packet, directs and places them beside the letter; then she tries to ruffle her bed, and give it a lately occupied air: no easy task, for a bed that has not been slept in *will not* look like one that has. Then she undresses; and by-and-by, when her hot water is brought, makes her toilet afresh, having first placed letter and parcel in a conspicuous situation upon the chest of drawers which serves as dressing-table, and goes downstairs.

How near the time is now! She refers, for the hundredth time, to the paper of directions left with her by Rivers. At such an hour she is to set off. It is within

five minutes of that hour. She has ordered over-night a carriage to convey her. It is true that an omnibus plies between hotel and station, but from its publicity she shrinks with unconquerable aversion. It will be full of people. They will be talking and laughing. They will talk to her; perhaps—quite as likely as not—they will ask her where she is going!

So she has ordered an open fly for herself. It shall be no expense to Professor Forth. She can easily return him by post the money for it. Yes; but *whose* money? A scorching blush burns cheek and brow, and she covers her miserable face with her hands.

It is three minutes past the appointed hour, and the carriage is not yet here. Perhaps there has been some mistake! Perhaps it was never ordered! But no sooner has this sickly hope—that is scarcely a hope either—flared up in her mind, than it is extinguished again. For an open fly comes rolling briskly up to the door. Per-

haps, it may not be hers. Other people order flys too. Perhaps it may be for some one else. But this delusion also dies.

"The carriage is ready, ma'am," says a waiter, approaching her.

"Are you sure that it is mine?" she asks huskily. "Are you sure that it is not meant for some one else—that there is no mistake?"

"No mistake at all, ma'am!"

There is nothing for it but to get in. As she takes her seat:

"Will you dine at the *table d'hôte* to-day, ma'am?" asks the waiter innocently.

In an instant all the truant blood has poured back into her snow-white face. Does he suspect her? Has he asked her on purpose?

"No!" she answers almost inaudibly—"no, not to-day."

And now she is off! The die is cast! Nothing has happened to prevent her.

To the last moment she has dimly believed that something would happen to prevent her. But no! nothing has! No fire has fallen from heaven to consume her! No accident has occurred to hinder her! By what small accidents—happening at the last moment—have other people been saved! No accident comes to save *her!* Neither God nor man cares what becomes of *her!*

The morning is lovely, with morning's fresh look of newness, as if the ancient hills had but just been turned out of their Maker's workshop. Lapis-blue is the lake, as a summer lake should be; and with its little islands laughing in summer forest-green upon its radiant lap. Over one mountain shoulder, indeed, a few slight cloud-shadows, thrown light as gauzy scarves, still lie. But on his brothers' granite knees there is strong resolute sunshine, and in their ravines shadows cut hard and black.

Oh, cruel world! Again you are jeering

her with your beauty! Her eyes roll wildly round, and thought after thought courses with mad rapidity through her head. Little irrelevant incidents out of far-away childhood, fragments of forgotten books, texts of Scripture. "I will look unto the hills from whence cometh my help!" That is what teases her most. And yet what applicability is there in it to her? Does any help come from the hills to her? Beneath the trees that lip the lake, and through whose leafage come ever glimpses of its dazzling gaiety, the sweet road winds. Along it some of the inmates of the hotel are leisurely walking, and, as she passes, look up to nod and smile at her.

Would they nod and smile at her did they know whither and on what errand she is bent? What right has she to leave them under such a delusion? She must undeceive them. So distraught is her brain that she leans out of the carriage to accomplish this lunatic purpose, but

they are already left behind. How fast the driver drives!

Why does he drive so fast? She calls out to him to go slower; and then, with a new and contradictory longing that it should be over, should be irrevocable, bids him drive faster again. And still, numberless as sand-grains, quicker than lightning, the thoughts rush through her head. It is a sentence out of "Sartor Resartus" now that is beating and hammering in her brain; a "Sartor Resartus" casually left behind by some stray guest at the hotel, and as casually opened by her yesterday. "Love not Pleasure; Love God: This is the Everlasting Yea!" Why should it buzz in *her* ears? What has it to say to *her?* How short the drive is! The roofs of Keswick are already in sight. That was a short drive, too—the drive to church on her marriage morning. With what dreadful vividness does it now return in each detail of its pinched and icy misery upon her memory; she sitting there in

dead despairing obstinacy, and Sarah sobbing beside her, telling her that it was not too late! Sarah was right. It was not too late then. If Sarah were here now, would she still tell her that it is not too late? Oh, why is not she here then? At every step of the road her agony heightens, and a cold sweat stands on her forehead. It is not too late! *It is not too late!* This is written in letters of fire all over the mountains; all over the lapis lake and sapphire sky. *It is not too late!* How plainly she can read the words! They are taking the character of a command! *It is not too late!* Dare she disobey such a mandate?

"Stop!" she cries, standing up suddenly, like one possessed. But her emotion is so overpowering, and her throat so dry, that no sound issues from it. The horse still trots rapidly on. "*Stop!*" she repeats, but once again her disobedient organs play her false, and the horse trots on. "STOP!" she cries frantically, a third time; and now, at

last, the coachman hears, and pulls up. "Go back!" she says hoarsely, and almost unintelligibly; "go back to the hotel!" then, becoming aware, though sight is dim and head giddy, of the unbounded astonishment depicted on his face—"I—I—have forgotten something!"

"We shall lose the train, ma'am," he answers, civilly demurring; "we have not too much time as it is."

"Go back!" she repeats, huskily; and then, indeed, wondering, he obeys.

She sinks back, and covers her face with her hands. What has she done? She forbids herself to ask or think. But has she done it in vain? If, during her absence, her letter has been discovered, she will have returned in vain. Even if it has not been already discovered, every minute that passes lessens its chance of escape. At this very moment it may be being found, and she will have turned back in vain.

"How slow you drive!" she cries harshly; "drive quicker! quicker!"

How could she ever have thought the distance short? It is immeasurably, unbelievably long! The hotel is in sight! A few people are standing about the door. Have they heard? Are they talking about it? The fly has stopped. Is she in time? It seems as if there were an ominous silence about the idlers hanging round. Have they heard? She dare not look the waiter, who comes to help her out, in the face. She staggers past him into the hall; then, by a tremendous effort, steadying herself, she rushes upstairs. Is she in time? Flight after flight she mounts, with that question surging in her ears. She has reached her room—has burst into it. Is she in time? One glance gives her the answer. Yes, she is! Undisturbed, exactly as she had left them upon the top of the chest of drawers, lie letter and packet. She *is* in time! Oh, the relief of that thought! And yet, so complicatedly contradictory are we, that, at the sight so madly desired, a distinct pang of disap-

pointment crosses her heart. Had the letter been discovered, there would have been the one and only refuge left her, and no one could *then* have blamed her for availing herself of it. She starts, shuddering at herself. Is she already repenting of her repentance? What security has she that she may not again go back from it? Within her there is none; if there *is* a security for her, it must be one outside her. She has taken the letter into her hand, and stands for a few moments motionless; a desperate determination gaining strength in her heart, and painting itself on her haggard yet resolute face. Since the letter has not yet been delivered to him, she herself will deliver it. She will tell him under what circumstances it was written. *This* shall be her expiation.

Without giving herself time for hesitation, she moves quickly out of the room, and knocks at her husband's door. There is no answer, and she knocks again. Still no

reply. Perhaps, though it is not likely, he may be out. So she enters. No, he is in his usual seat, by his improvised writing-table. He could not have heard. His attitude is not quite his usual one, for he is apparently unoccupied, leaning back in his chair, and with his head bent a little forwards on his chest. He must be thinking, and will probably chide her for disturbing him. Well, it cannot be helped. Heaven knows he has cause enough to chide her!

"Can I speak to you?"

Her voice sounds strangely resonant in this silent room. There is no answer, nor does her husband show, by any movement or slightest change of position, that he is aware of her vicinity. It is very odd. She has spoken loudly and distinctly, and he is not deaf. He must be asleep; and yet, he is not apt to fall asleep in the morning! A chill terror is creeping over her, but she tries to shake it off. Her nerves are unstrung. Why should not he

be asleep? How apt old people are to slide into a doze.

Conquering the nameless, senseless dread of approaching him that has come over her, she walks firmly up to him, and laying her hand on his arm, stoops and looks into his face. The next instant a sharp shriek rings through the hotel, and when frightened visitors and chambermaids, hurrying from all quarters, reach the room, they find Mrs. Forth lying stretched on the floor beside her husband, as inanimate as he. Only that in time they bring *her* round again. As for him, he has for ever vindicated his character from the imputation of being a *malade imaginaire*, and the Professorship of Etruscan in the University of Oxbridge is vacant!

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